THE MERCER BOYS SERIES

1941.

Mary Ann to
Jennie Prather

from Grandmom

and

Grandpop

Plantation

Yanceyville

R. F. D. No 1

THE MERCER BOYS AT WOODCREST

By CAPWELL WYCKOFF

Author of

"The Mercer Boys' Cruise in the Lassie," "The Mercer Boys on a Treasure Hunt," "The Mercer Boys' Mystery Case," "The Mercer Boys on the Beach Patrol," "The Mercer Boys in Summer Camp."

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THE MERCER BOYS AT WOODCREST

CHAPTER I

TERRY MAKES A MISTAKE

"Pardon me," said the red-headed boy, with a grin, "but what is that ancient vehicle over there?"

The tall young man on the station platform turned and looked at the long carriage across the street with a slight frown. He was dressed in a gray uniform and he wore a tall military hat. The letters, in gold, of W. M. I. showed plainly on the hat. It meant Woodcrest Military Institute, and Lieutenant Sommers was an important part of that institution.

Two boys who had just stepped from a train at Portville station grinned and nudged each other. They were nice looking young fellows, with lean faces, sandy hair and freckled faces, browned by exposure to the wind and sun. To an observer it

would appear that they were brothers, and it was so. Don Mercer whispered to the younger boy:

"Terry's up to something. It wouldn't be Terry if he couldn't find some fun anywhere!"

Jim Mercer returned the grin. "Looks like he was trying to josh that cadet officer. Just think, Don old boy, we'll be wearing uniforms like that very soon!"

Lieutenant Sommers turned to look coldly at the genial looking boy with the mop of red hair. "That," said he, with precision, "is the school station wagon."

"I see," murmured Terry. "And those things in the front are horses, aren't they?"

"That is the name I've always called them by," retorted the Lieutenant, growing still colder.

"Thanks. Is the school far away? I mean, could I walk it?" Terry pressed.

"Not very well. Why should you want to walk it?"

"Oh, to tell you the truth, I don't want to. But that's a rickity looking wagon and I don't like the wild aspect of those horses. Look at the way they droop their heads! I was just thinking——"

"Don't," cut in the lieutenant, a faint spot of red showing in his cheek. "Judging by appearances,

thinking would make a wreck of you physically and mentally!" He turned to the six or seven boys, all in civilian clothes, who had listened with ill-concealed delight to the conversation. "All those who are bound for Woodcrest kindly follow me." Turning on his heel he walked toward the station wagon.

Terry chuckled and started off. But at that moment two pairs of strong hands clutched him.

"Hold on there, Chucklehead!" commanded Don Mercer.

"What is your hurry, you old rascal?" called Jim.

The three boys shook hands heartily. They were the best of friends and had spent the previous summer on a cruise down the coast of Maine, during which time they were instrumental in capturing a band of marine bandits who had been a source of terror to residents for some time. Don and Jim were sons of a wealthy lumber man of Bridgewater, Maine, and Terry, who had only a mother and sister, lived in a town near them. They had been school chums and Terry had won a scholarship at Woodcrest Military Institute during the previous spring. Both Jim and Don had planned college careers, and wishing to be with their cheerful comrade, whose bobbing red head had earned him the name of

Chucklehead, they had enrolled in the same school. Now, after an exciting and vigorous summer, details of which were related in the first volume of this series, "THE MERCER BOYS' CRUISE IN THE 'LASSIE,'" they had met on the platform of the Portville station in New York State, ready to enter upon their new phase of life.

"I'm mighty glad to see you fellows," greeted Terry. "Were you on the train I came in on?"

"No, we just arrived on the later one," furnished Jim. "What are you up to with that lieutenant?"

"Oh, nothing," confessed Terry. "He was so dignified looking that I couldn't help poking a little fun at him, that's all. Well, come on. If we don't get a move on he'll court martial us as soon as we get to the school. He came back at me in good style that last crack, didn't he?"

The boys picked up their suitcases and clambered into the station wagon, the three chums sitting in the first seat back of the driver. The driver was a little man with scant gray hair, who took no particular notice of them, but drooped unemotionally in the forward seat. After seeing that all of the new members were safely aboard, the correct looking lieutenant climbed up beside the driver.

"Let us go, Ashley," he directed.

The driver whipped up the two patient looking horses and the wagon moved off down the road for the distant hills and woods. The three friends had plenty to talk about, but the rest of the boys were silent. Most of them were making their first trip away from home and all were strangers, so they sat in perfect silence and watched the scenery. The boys on the first seat gradually grew quiet too and enjoyed the magnificent view which was unfolded to their eyes in the sweeping hills and rolling woods from which the academy had derived its name.

The seats of the wagon were plain board affairs and the legs of the boys dangled in plain view beneath them. Right in front of Terry were the gray clad legs of the lieutenant, and the boy's eyes wandered more than once to them. A contemplative look came into his gray eyes and he began to feel in the lapel of his coat. From it he drew two pins and then leaned over to Don.

"Got a piece of string with you?" he whispered.

Don shook his head and Terry repeated his question to Jim, the younger Mercer unwound one which had become twisted around the handle of his suit-case and handed it to Terry.

"What do you want with it?" he inquired.

Terry winked but did not reply. He looked once

searchingly at the back of the lieutenant and then bent the pins, much like primitive fish hooks. Then, taking the string, he tied it from one pin to the other. The boys in the carryall watched him intently.

The two pins having been joined together by an eighth-inch length of string, the red-headed boy leaned down and passed one hook carefully through the sharply creased trousers of the cadet in front of him. It dangled there, and Terry sat back to look for danger. Nothing happened, and he once more bent down, this time to lift the cuff of the trousers and slip the second pin into it. The operation was accomplished without accident, and the lieutenant had one leg of his trousers drawn up for a space of four or five inches.

The boys in the station wagon grinned broadly when they perceived the trend of Terry's thought, but the red-headed boy looked calmly away to the hills. Totally unconscious of the fact that he was the object of their mirth the important young officer stared straight ahead of him. Out of the side of his mouth Terry spoke to Don.

"If one of those pins sticks his leg, goodnight for me!" he observed.

Nothing of the sort happened. The attention of the boys was now drawn to the view that suddenly

unfolded as they topped a final rise of ground. Before them, at the top of the ridge, against the dark background of the surrounding woods, was Woodcrest Military Academy itself, with its ivy-covered central hall, its two dormitories and its gymnasium and boathouse. Back of the school a single large sheet of beautiful silver water showed, the Lake Blair so often spoken of in the catalogue which the boys had. On all sides trees and hills spread out, until they were lost in the distance.

"By George, that's beautiful," breathed Jim, enthusiastically.

"It certainly is," agreed Don, and Terry nodded. Don went on: "That center hall must be Locke Hall, and the one to the right it either Inslee or Clinton. We got our rooms in Locke, on the second floor. Where will you be located, Terry?"

"For the present I'm in Inslee," returned Terry. "I didn't know where you fellows would go, so I didn't say anything. After a day or so I'll try to see if I can't be transferred."

Nothing more was said until they drove up to the lawn before Locke Hall and then the wagon came to a stop. The lieutenant jumped out and faced the new boys.

"Step down out of there!" he commanded.

"Lively, now!" They obeyed and faced him, casting furtive glances at his hiked up trouser leg. The lieutenant looked them over slowly and then once more addressed them. "You are now to become students at this institution, and I would like to say that from now on you'll have to give up some of the soft things that you have been used to. Among them, some of your pet foolishness." Here he looked briefly straight at Terry, who returned the look with bland interest. "You will acquire a measure of dignity and poise that will make new men out of you. I am representative of the efficiency and discipline of this school, and I hope we may expect as much from each one of you. What are you laughing at?"

The question was addressed to the entire number of boys, so no one took the responsibilty of answering. The lieutenant turned away.

"Report at Locke Hall and register," he snapped, and strode off, the one leg ridiculous in the extreme. The newcomers watched him with interest. A brother lieutenant came out of Locke Hall and they saluted, and once past him the other turned to look at the upraised trouser. Then he grinned, until, seeing the new boys looking, he composed his face and passed them. Still unheeding the lieutenant went on until

he met an instructor, also in uniform, whom he saluted and would have passed, except that the instructor stopped him.

"What has happened to your trousers, Sommers?" the boys heard the instructor ask.

Sommers looked down at his right leg and then stooped and savagely tore the pins and string out. With a savage glance he looked back at the interested group of boys and his eyes flashed fire. Hastily saluting his superior he hastened on, and the teacher, with a faint smile on his face, resumed his walk.

"Well," sighed Terry. "That's over. Worked better than I thought it would."

"You're lucky," laughed Don, as they made their way to the office. "I wouldn't be surprised if he took it out of you later on."

Don and Jim registered first and then went off to their rooms, which were on the floor above. Terry registered and then awaited his orders.

"Inslee Hall," nodded the clerk, with an engaging smile. "Room 17, second floor." He pointed out of the door. "Go to your left along the path and you can't miss it. Supper at six o'clock. Next!"

Terry picked up his suitcase and went out of the screen door and out onto the well kept driveway. A wide expanse of lawn spread out before him and

off in the distance he saw the hall which was to be his dormitory. Just beyond it he could see the roof of another building that they had not been able to see from the main road. Terry was not sure which of them was Inslee Hall, especially as the path ran, after a split, to both of them.

"Must be the one in the rear," he thought, and started toward it. After skirting a clump of high bushes and a fringe of fine trees he saw the hall before him, an old wooden building with three chimneys and broad windows. The path which ran to it was not as well kept and Terry wondered at that. Drawing nearer to the place he was attracted by the utter neglect of the place. Close to the building weeds grew in careless profusion, and the steps were covered with brushwood and dirt. Terry was frankly puzzled and approached slowly.

"I'll want to get a transfer from this place in a hurry," he murmured. "Funny, there doesn't seem to be anyone around."

He stepped up on the stone steps and looked in the narrow windows that flanked the main door. At once he perceived his mistake.

"This isn't the place," he decided. "This place is deserted. Wonder what kind of a place it is?"

He pressed his face close to the glass and looked

in. The main hall of the old building was before him, and a desk, two chairs and a bookcase stood there. Thick layers of dust covered everything. In the back of the hall a curving flight of stairs ran up to the second floor.

"This place hasn't been used for years," thought Terry, about to turn away. Just at that moment a white door at the far end of the downstairs hall opened slowly and an old man appeared. In his hand he had a tin tray, upon which were two plates of meat and potatoes. Steam arose from the tray, and as the old man shuffled slowly forward Terry perceived that he held a candle in his hand, which was lighted.

"Somebody does live in the place," he thought. "Wonder they wouldn't clean up a bit."

At that moment the old man looked up and saw him. An expression of terror spread over his face and with the quickness of lightning he blew out his candle, at the same time stepping into a doorway and out of sight. Terry stared in amazement.

"Well, what do you know about that!" he gasped. "Poor old fellow must have thought I was a ghost or something. Well, I'm in the wrong place, I can see that." He stepped back and looked up at the front of the building. On a board sign, its letters

almost rubbed out by the elements, was a name painted in white. It said "Clanhammer Hall."

"Clanhammer Hall," mused Terry, turning away. "According to my catalogue, that was the original building of Woodcrest School. Well, it isn't much of a place now, I can tell you. I wonder why that old fellow ducked out of sight when he saw me?"

CHAPTER II

LIFE AT WOODCREST

TERRY had no trouble in locating Inslee Hall and once there Room 17 was easy to find. Two newcomers were already there, young fellows by the name of Harlow and Murray, and Terry became acquainted with them before he left to go to Locke Hall. He stowed his belongings away and then went over to the main hall to look up his friends. He found them in room 21, a large and pleasant room in the front of the main building. They were arranging things around the room when he entered and he sat on the extra bed and watched them.

"Just saw something mighty queer," he informed them, when they had finished.

In answer to their inquiries he told them of his experience at Clanhammer Hall. Both of the boys were interested but treated the matter lightly.

"They must use the place for something special," Don suggested.

"That's all well and good, but that doesn't ex-

plain why that old fellow ducked into the doorway the way he did. No, I feel that there is something else in it than just that. However, perhaps we had better keep it to ourselves, at least until we are a little better acquainted around here."

The Mercer brothers agreed that this plan was best. Just at that moment a knock sounded on the door. A bit surprised Jim called "Come in."

The door opened to admit a fine looking fellow in full uniform with stripes which the boys afterward knew to be those of a cadet captain. He had an engaging smile and the newcomers felt a friendliness toward him at once.

"How do you do, fellows?" greeted the cadet. "I am Captain Rhodes, of the senior class, and I've come to look in on you. One of the traditions of the seniors here is to make fourth class men feel at home, and so I've come to introduce myself. I'm not intruding, I hope?"

"Not at all, Captain Rhodes," replied Don, heartily. "Mighty glad to have you, and we appreciate your tradition. I am Don Mercer, and this is my brother Jim. This is Terry Mackson."

"Glad to know you all," nodded the captain, shaking hands with them. "Is this the fellow who pinned up Sommer's trousers?"

"My fame has run before me!" murmured Terry, smiling.

"Yes, Terry's the culprit," laughed Don. "A bad boy all around, always into something, but he means well, Mr. Rhodes."

"I don't doubt it," returned the cadet. "You may drop the mister, Mercer. Speaking of Terry's well meaning attempt on Mr. Sommers, I can safely say that no harm was done except a temporary bruising of the lieutenant's feelings. He is our prize dignitary, but underneath a very nice fellow. Nothing mean about him, but simply filled with a spirit of military efficiency. Well, how do you think you are going to like Woodcrest?"

The boys assured him that they thought they would like it very much. Rhodes went on to tell them a few things about the school and to praise their colonel.

"Colonel Morrell is a fine man," he said. "We all look up to our headmaster. He isn't here yet, but will be in a day or so. At present we are in charge of his assistant, Major Tireson. The colonel is a little short, fat fellow, full of good humor and every inch a man. Have you seen the grounds yet?"

"We've been busy unpacking," replied Jim. "But

Terry saw some of them. He's rooming over at Inslee."

"I didn't see much," put in Terry. "I did see that old dormitory in the back, Clanhammer Hall. Isn't the place used any more?"

"No, and it hasn't been for a number of years. It was the original hall of the school, in fact, the only building of the school when it was first started, but it was condemned some years ago as a fire trap and hasn't been used since. Colonel Morrell is going to have it cleaned out this year and opened up as a sort of memorial of the original school. As far as I know no one has been in it for years."

"No one in it now?" asked Terry, quickly.

"Oh, no. No one ever goes in it; I don't know who has the key for it." A bell sounded loudly in the hall and the senior got up. "That is warning bell for supper," he explained. "You have ten minutes to wash and report at the dining hall, downstairs. I'll see you after supper, perhaps."

"You notice that Rhodes said no one had been in that hall for years," reminded Terry, a few minutes later, as they walked down the stairs.

"Yes," said Don. "There seems to be some sort of a mystery there."

The boys were assigned places at the table and

enjoyed their first meal at the academy, a meal that was somewhat silent because of the newness of things. The second, third and first class men made up for the lack of talk on the others. All of the fourth class men were new, while the others were old friends. After the meal the boys were free to roam, and they walked all over the place, visiting the gymnasium and the boathouse and the other dormitories. They walked along the margin of the beautiful lake and on the way back they passed Clanhammer Hall, dimly seen in the dusk.

"It certainly looks deserted now," commented Jim.

"Yes," said Terry. "It did when I first saw it. Suppose we ought to look in the windows?"

"I wouldn't," declared Don. "We're new here, and probably have no right to snoop. Perhaps we will later on."

Before retiring they sat around their room and Rhodes paid them a brief visit, bringing with him two other senior class men, Merton and Chipps. Merton was a tall blonde fellow and Chipps small and energetic. They talked of sports and Rhodes asked them if they planned to come out for football.

"I hardly think so," answered Don. "During this first year we want to pay particular attention to our studies, though we don't expect to neglect athletics.

But we have all been on running teams at home, and we expect to go out for that here."

"That's a good idea," approved Chipps. "Most of our veterans of last year have returned this year and the best you fellows could probably do would be to get places on the scrub team. I think you'd do well to put in a year training on the running team or the crew, and take up football later on."

A warning bell sent the seniors back to their rooms and Terry departed for Inslee. At ten o'clock the lights went out and the boys were in bed.

"Well, Don," commented Jim, as he lay in bed. "Tomorrow we'll get into harness."

"Yes," his brother returned. "I guess we'd better get in a good night's sleep. Lay you a dollar to a doughnut that we'll be ready for bed by this time tomorrow night."

"I won't take you up," Jim retorted. "I have a sneaking idea you'll win. 'Night, old man."

At seven o'clock in the morning a bugle pealed out and the Mercer brothers woke to find the sunlight streaming in their windows. They jumped out of bed, washed quickly and then went to chapel, meeting Terry in the hall. When all of the cadets had been seated a thin man in the uniform of a major came out on the platform and opened the ses-

sion with a prayer. After it was over he addressed them briefly, in a rather sharp, precise voice.

"The second, senior and third classes will resume work as usual," he announced. "The new members, those of the fourth class, will report for lesson instructions, medical examination, uniform measurements, and drill after dinner. Fourth class lessons will begin officially tomorrow at eight fifteen o'clock. I may say briefly that Colonel Morrell will arrive either tomorrow or the day following, and until he does, you will refer all questions to me, Major Tireson. That will be all for this morning, gentlemen. Report to the dining hall for breakfast."

After the morning meal the new boys found plenty to occupy their minds. They reported at five different classes and obtained books, went under a rigid medical examination, and were then measured for their uniforms. Before dinner time the three friends walked out on the lawn, resplendent in neat gray uniforms and black hats.

"By thunder mighty, as old Captain Blow used to say," commented Terry, looking proudly at his sleeves. "I feel like the last word in dressed-upness. Can't one of you fellows get a full length mirror and hold it up for me to see myself?"

"You saw yourself in the glass inside," laughed Jim.

"That wasn't enough," said Terry. "I want to look at me forever!"

After the noon meal they assembled on the parade ground and were told off into squads of eight. Under first, second and third class lieutenants they were drilled.

"Oh, boy, look who we got!" whispered Terry, who was flanked on either side by his two friends.

Lieutenant Sommers was their drill instructor and he was a thorough one. But when they were finished Terry could not find any fault with the man. He was not a bully nor even revengeful, he recognized Terry at once, but he did not press him any more than the others. He was every inch a young soldier and did his work with snap and precision, but he left personal feeling out of it. Terry concurred heartily with Rhodes' statement that Sommers was a good fellow beneath his dignity.

After drill the boys were at liberty to do whatever they chose until five-thirty and with others, whose acquaintance they had made by now they elected to go swimming in Lake Blair while it was yet warm enough to do so. Terry went off to see about changing his dormitory.

"See if you can't get somewhere in Locke," Jim said, just before he left. "We have an extra bed in our room, but I think someone is coming to claim it in a day or so."

Terry came back and joined them in the boathouse, where the boys changed into their bathing suits. Don and Jim, dripping wet, came out of the water as he was changing into his suit.

"What luck?" hailed Don.

"I got a place in Locke," said Terry, carelessly, pulling on his suit.

"Whereabouts?" asked Jim.

"Room 21," answered Terry, innocently.

"Why, that's our room!" exclaimed Don.

"Sure it is! I found out that the fellow who was to room with you isn't going to turn up, so I got it. I'll trot my duffle over later on."

The boys were overjoyed at the prospect of being together and after an invigorating swim in Lake Blair they helped Terry fix up his corner of the dormitory room. After the evening meal they had an hour to themselves and then they began to study. Just before warning and taps they were visited by a few friends and then they undressed.

"Well Jim, how do you feel about what I said last night?" asked Don, as he got into bed.

Jim yawned with enthusiasm. "Just as I told you, you win, hands down. I feel like a good sleep. That business of holding your little fingers against the seam of your trouser and making your back as straight as a board is some strenuous, I will admit. But it certainly will straighten us up some, though I never could lay any claim to being the least bit round shouldered. But I like the life here first rate. Let me have your pillow."

Before Don could reply Jim took his pillow and hurled it at Terry, who, clad in a pair of blue pajamas, was staring out into the blackness of the night. The red-headed boy turned and looked grimly at Jim. Then he stooped down and scooped up the pillow.

"Cut it out, you two," ordered Don. "I hear that an Officer of the Day looks in on us every night at this time to see if all is shipshape before the lights go out. I don't want to get a call down because I haven't a pillow on my bed. Let's have it, Terry."

The pillow was delivered through the air, with considerable force. Jim grumbled.

"I just threw it at him to wake him up. What were you dreaming about then?"

"I was just wondering about that old hall, and

what is going on in there," Terry replied, getting into bed.

"Oh, bother that old hall!" snorted Jim. "Forget it!"

A third classman, Officer of the Day, looked in the door and around the room. "O. K. gentlemen," he said quietly, and withdrew. The lights went out suddenly. For a minute all was silent. Then, from Terry's bed:

"Forget nothing! There is something wrong there, and I'd like to find out what it is! "

CHAPTER III.

DISTURBING NEWS

A WEEK passed and the boys settled without difficulty into the routine life of Woodcrest Military Institute. They began to enjoy their classes and the drill, which each day seemed to become less burdensome and rigorous. In the afternoons they reported for track work and began to develop into fairly good runners. The evening, while mostly devoted to study, gave them plenty of time for visiting friends and having some good wholesome fun, and at the week's ending they found that they thoroughly enjoyed their life at the institute.

Colonel Morrell had not as yet appeared at the academy and the boys from Maine were anxious to see him. No one seemed to know precisely what the trouble was, and even Major Tireson seemed to have something on his mind. Not that the routine was at all broken by the colonel's absence. Things went along as smoothly as they did when the headmaster was present, and aside from a few statements of

wonder, expressed by the cadets, nothing was thought about the matter until one evening during their second week at school.

Don and Jim had retired to their room to study and had been engaged at it for about fifteen minutes when Terry burst into the room. The red-headed boy was more than usually excited.

"What's the big rush?" asked Jim, looking up from his book with a slight frown.

"You fellows heard the news?" Terry blurted out. "Of course you haven't, or you wouldn't be sitting there calmly studying."

"We haven't heard anything but your mad rush in the door," said Don, laying down his book. "Suppose you tell us what excites you so much?"

"What do you think? Our colonel has disappeared!"

"What?" cried the Mercer boys, in a breath.

Terry bounced onto the bed. "Yes, sir. The news leaked out tonight. I didn't get all of the details, but he was on his way down here and suddenly disappeared. Just vanished into thin air, if Colonel Morrell could do that. I've heard he is pretty husky, so maybe he didn't just float away, but he's gone!"

"Where did you hear this?" inquired Don, study forgotten for the time being.

"Down at the office. I went down there to get some supplies and a detective was talking to Major Tiresome. The detective talked in a loud voice, and three or four of us heard every word he said. The colonel's brother hired detectives and they are searching for him. Major Tiresome was saying that he had received a telegram from Colonel Morrell just before he left for the school here, and that was all that he knew. From the expression on the major's face I could see that he didn't want us to know it and would liked to have kept it quiet, but it's out now."

Before the boys could reply to this astonishing piece of news a knock sounded on the door and a moment later Rhodes, Merton and Chipps came in. The three upper classmen had become quite friendly with the fourth class men during their short period of time at the school and were in the habit of dropping in evenings to talk over school topics with them. It was evident that they had the same subject in mind which had caused Terry to rush into the room.

"Well," remarked Rhodes, after one look at their faces. "I see you fellows have heard the news, too."

Jim nodded. "Yes, we have, and we're mighty sorry to hear it, too. Terry was down in the office and heard it there."

"You'd be even more sorry if you knew the jolly old colonel as we do." put in Cadet Merton, seating himself on Jim's bed. "Charlie, here, has the latest. Tell them about it, Rhodes."

"The major called in the cadet captains," began Rhodes. "And he told us the news. I don't think he would have allowed the cadet body to know what had happened if some of the boys hadn't heard it in the office. He told us to keep things running in our respective classes much the same as usual, and he was confident that everything would turn out all right in the end. The details are these: Colonel Morrell started for the school here last Wednesday, on the afternoon train. He lives up in Rockwood, New York, and he should have arrived at Portville at about seven o'clock. He had previously wired the major that he would be here at that time, so he was expected. We fellows didn't know it, and of course it wasn't until the last couple of days that we began to notice that he wasn't here and to wonder why. The major must have been looking for him all the while, but he kept it to himself, although he told us that he was greatly worried. He felt that if the cadets didn't know anything about it, it would be better.

"As I said, the colonel started for here on the

afternoon train, and he was supposed to come straight through. But for some unexpected reason he did not. Instead, he got off at a way station about sixteen miles from here, a little hamlet called Spotville Point, and from that time to the present he was never seen! At least, not by anyone who ever told of it. The conductor on the train remembers that he got off there and that he had either a letter or a telegram in his hand, and that was the last ever heard of him. His brother wrote to him once or twice and then learned from Major Tireson that he hadn't arrived here, so he got the police and detectives into action at once, so far without any result. That's the whole story, and it's a mighty queer one."

"A queer one, and a mighty distressing one," murmured Chipps. "I surely hope nothing happened to our good old colonel."

"We're all with you on that," returned Rhodes quietly.

"He had a letter or a telegram with him, you say?" inquired Don, his mind intent on the problem.

"That is what the conductor said. I suppose the colonel was pretty well known, for he travels the railroad a couple of times a year, and has for the last number of years. But his brother declares that

he didn't have any letter or telegram with him when he left the house, and they have learned that he didn't get any at the station or postoffice on his way down. Apparently there was nothing on his mind when he left his brother, either, so it certainly does make a mysterious case."

"It surely does," agreed Jim. "And he stopped off at Spotville Point?"

"Yes, and that's a mystery in itself. I've been to Spotville Point myself, in fact, we've all passed through it on our way to summer encampment. Nothing to it except a dozen houses, most of them mere shacks, with one or two good sized estates and the one station. Not even a postoffice."

"Then he couldn't have received a letter there," said Terry.

"No. Besides, he had it when he got off of the train. He simply must have had some reasonable excuse for getting off at a place like that. After he did get off no one saw which way he went. The man in the little station doesn't even remember having seen anyone on that afternoon."

Don glanced at the calendar. "That was last Wednesday, you say. That was October 3rd, wasn't it? Well, we've never seen Colonel Morrell, but

from what we hear, he must be a very fine man, and we sincerely hope they find him quickly."

"My only regret," drawled Chipps, "is that they don't turn the whole cadet corps loose to hunt him up! I'll venture to say that we'd find him if we had to scour the whole country to do it!"

"If wanting to find him would accomplish anything, we'd find him in short order," said Merton.

"If he should not turn up we'd have Major Tireson for headmaster, I suppose," ventured Jim.

Rhodes nodded, but not cheerfully. "Yes, and I'm sure the fellows wouldn't like that. Not that Major Tireson is a tyrant or anything like it, but he simply isn't in the same class with the colonel. You can't get close to him, if you see what I mean. Why, any fellow in the corps could walk up to the colonel and talk to him without fear of being frowned down on, but the major is pretty much aloof. I personally like a man you can feel respect for and yet know him in that fine, comrady way, but you can't do that with the major. So here's hoping our beloved colonel turns up safely."

"We won't think of any other possibility," maintained Merton, stoutly.

"If we don't think of getting in some studying pretty soon," reminded Chipps, who stood at the

head of all of his classes, "we'll all do growl duty tomorrow."

The new boys knew that "growl duty" meant remaining in after hours to brush up on lessons. The three upper classmen departed for their rooms, leaving the Mercers and Terry alone.

"All I hope is that nothing has happened to the colonel," said Terry, after they had discussed the news for a time longer.

On the following morning the school buzzed with subdued excitement and the cadets lost no time in assembling in the chapel. When Major Tireson appeared on the platform he looked somewhat tired and worried and he was somewhat sharp in his tone as he led the morning exercises. When they were over he addressed the eager boys.

"You have all heard the story of what happened to Colonel Morrell," he began. "I am sorry to say that it is true, but hasten to assure you that there need be no cause for excitement or worry over it. There is always some good reason for even the most mysterious things, and I'm sure that some day we will know just why Colonel Morrell went away as he did. As a warning I want to say that any relaxing of discipline will be severely punished, so see to it that all matter of routine is carried out with the

same efficiency as when the colonel is here. Until he is here I will be in complete charge. Remember that. Assembly is dissmissed."

"He didn't have to lay so much stress on the fact that we might relax our discipline," grumbled Lieutenant Sommers, as they made their way to the breakfast hall. "We have a spirit of the corps in this school, if he doesn't know it!"

Classes lagged that day, for the boys all had their minds on the missing colonel and his possible fate. Drill was carried through with its accustomed snap, justifying the statement of Lieutenant Sommers. In the evening the boys indulged in much talk, and several frequented the vicinity of the office, to be on hand in case anything new turned up. But nothing did, and when taps sounded the cadets went reluctantly to bed.

"Too bad we can't carry on some kind of a hunt ourselves," declared Terry, just before dropping off to sleep. "I have respect for detectives, but I do think that some of us could tear in and locate a few clues that might prove surprising."

"Perhaps we will run across something before long," said Don.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SUNLIGHT MESSAGE

The week drifted on with no word of the colonel and the cadets ceased to hold meetings of discussion. Each one of them thought constantly of the missing man but the subject had been talked out, especially as there was no additional details. On Saturday the cadets always enjoyed a half holiday, and on that day Don, Jim, Rhodes and Terry went for a row on Lake Blair.

Lessons always took up Saturday morning, but there was no drill and no athletic training, although all of the football games and baseball games were played on Saturday afternoons. In between seasons the cadets spent their time on Saturday afternoons amusing themselves as they saw fit, some of them going down to the town, or swimming when it was warm enough to swim, or finding any amusements that they chose. The four friends had been to the village and had made some purchases, and now, upon

their return to the school, Don proposed that they go rowing.

"Can't keep you off of the water, I see," Terry grinned.

Don shrugged his shoulders. "I do love it, to tell you the truth. However, going for a row will be somewhat different than sailing the "Lassie," if that is what you are referring to."

"That's what," nodded Terry. "I haven't been on the water as much as you have, but I won't be sorry to go out myself."

They went down to the boathouse on the lake and dragged out a large flat bottom row boat which was at the disposal of the cadets at all times. After launching it Rhodes and Jim took the oars and the other two sat in the stern. The two at the oars sent the boat out from the shore.

"Where away?" inquired Rhodes, looking at the two in the stern.

"I don't care," returned Don, lazily. "You might as well row around the lake and back. We haven't seen all of it yet."

"Do you expect to sit back and see me do all the work?" demanded Jim.

"Hadn't thought much about it!" grinned Don. "Aren't you?"

"Not so you could notice it!" retorted Jim.

They rowed down the lake to the point where it narrowed into a mere creek and then started up the opposite side, across from the school. Lake Blair was a body of blue water about three miles long and a half mile wide, deep only in the center, and it made a fitting setting for the old school. Thick trees ran down to the shore, and now that autumn was at hand the leaves on the trees had turned a multitude of brilliant colors. There was that air of crispness in the surroundings and the keen air that made the boys enjoy living the kind of active life they were experiencing. The sun hung high in the west, flooding the landscape with a light and warmth that was part of the very satisfying atmosphere.

"This is certainly one dandy place," commented Terry, enthusiastically.

"Yes," nodded Rhodes. "I love it. I don't think there is any place I'd rather be."

"Then you'll be somewhat sorry to graduate," observed Don.

Rhodes smiled. "No, I won't. I'll let you fellows into a little secret of mine. After I have graduated Colonel Morrell, provided everything is all right, is going to make me permanent drill commander. So I will stay here for some years to come."

"That's great," said Jim, heartily. "I hope, for your sake, that the colonel turns up all right."

"I hope he turns up all right for his own sake. You fellows like this lake? Well, so do I, but even as beautiful as it is now, there is a time when I like it better. I like it in the winter, when it is a sheet of ice, and we have the best skating in the world. At night we build big bonfires along the shore and have a whale of a time. That is the time you will like it."

When they had rowed to the other end of the lake, which was little more than a brook, the boys changed places and Don and Terry took the oars. They rowed back toward the boathouse, keeping over near the further shore, away from the school. On the bank directly opposite the boathouse a fine tree bent over the water, and the boat drifted under this. The boys pulled in the oars and sat there talking.

The sun was going down in the west and the back of Woodcrest was bathed in a reddish-yellow light. All three of the main halls and old Clanhammer shared the light of the declining sun, and a pretty picture was created. After they had admired it for a time and had talked of many things, Rhodes looked at his watch.

"It isn't exactly what you would call late, but

maybe we had better be getting back. We can take our time about it and maybe get in a little fun in the gymnasium before supper time. Shall we go?"

"All right," agreed Jim, picking up an oar.

But Don held up his hand. "Wait a minute, you fellows. Don't pull out from under these trees, yet."

"Why not?" inquired Rhodes. "What's up?"

"Look toward Clanhammer Hall," returned Don, who had been looking in that direction for some-time past. "Look at that upstairs window, over to the right."

The boys looked in the direction indicated by their chum. For a moment they did not see anything, but after a brief fraction of time a flash of light came from the window which Don had mentioned. It disappeared immediately and a second came, which was steadier than the first, then other flashes followed.

"Wonder what that is?" asked Terry.

"Don't ask me," shrugged Rhodes. "I thought there was no one in that place."

Don turned to Jim. "Doesn't that look to you like the Morse code?" he asked.

Jim nodded. "I think it is. Let's see if we can catch anything."

The four boys in the boat sat silently and watched the flashes from the house across the water. They

knew that the signals were being made with a piece of looking glass, into which the descending sun was pouring its last rays. Flash followed flash, some of them long and some of them short. To Rhodes and Terry they meant nothing, but the Mercer brothers, who had once been very familiar with the telegraph code, it was plain that some words were being repeated. When the flashes had ceased they looked at each other, startled.

"What did you make out of it?" asked Don.

"Why—why, it seemed to me, if I was reading correctly," stammered Jim, "that whoever it was was signalling the words "No progress". Is that what you got?"

"Yes," his brother nodded. "That is just what I got. "No progress" is right."

"But what in the world can no progress mean?" asked Terry.

"I don't know," answered Don. "But it means that something is going on in that old hall."

"But there is no one in the place," objected Rhodes.

"Tell Charlie what you saw the day you got here, Terry," suggested Jim.

Terry told his story and Rhodes was greatly interested. "That certainly is queer," he com-

mented, when Terry had finished. "It has always been understood here that no one was in the place. What an old man with a plate of food and candle could be doing in there is more than I can see."

"I wonder where that signal was going to?" mused Don, who had been watching the building intently. "It must have been directed to some point in the woods directly back of us. The message was in reality going right over our heads. Is there any kind of a building in the woods near here, Charlie?"

"As I remember it, there is an old farmhouse just back of us in the woods," said Rhodes, after a moment of thought. "I recall seeing it on one or two hikes we took. That signal might easily have been directed to the farmhouse, at least to the upper windows of it. That is the only building anywhere within a radius of five miles."

"Then that was the place where the message was received," declared Jim, with conviction. "Can't we hike over there now and take a look at the place? Is it very far?"

Rhodes shook his head. "Not very far. We can get there in fifteen minutes, and we can land from the boat here without being seen, thanks to the overhanging trees. Want to go?"

The others agreed at once and the boat was pushed

to shore, where they got out and tied it firmly. Then, under the leadership of the upper classman, they took their way through the thick trees that grew back of the lake front.

They walked on for fifteen minutes through the dusk of woods, until, coming to a slight rise in the ground, they came in sight of the farmhouse. It was an ancient affair of plain, unpainted boards, but kept in order nevertheless. The doors were in place and the windows were unbroken. A few unpainted boards of lighter color showed them some attempt at repairs had been made. Weeds grew about the back yard in profusion. Standing in the rough yard near the back door was an automobile of well known make, new and costly looking. The boys halted in the shelter of some large trees to consider, well out of sight of anyone in the house.

"Look at the upper back windows," directed Rhodes. "They are above the level of the tree tops, and from them anyone could plainly catch a signal from Clanhammer Hall. What shall we do, now that we are here?"

"I don't see that there is anything to do." returned Don. "We can't go up to the place, and we know that it isn't deserted. Perhaps——"

Jim grabbled his arm. "Hush," he whispered. "Someone is coming!"

The back door of the house opened and a man came out. He was tall and thin and was clothed in a dark suit, long light overcoat, and wore a cap which was pulled down over his eyes. He looked all around as he stepped out of the door and then closed it behind him with a resounding slam. Reaching into his pocket he took out a key and placed it in the lock, turning it and trying the knob. This operation having been accomplished he walked to the car, started his engine and rolled out of the yard. The car took a rutted road and was soon out of sight.

The boys waited until he was well out of sight and then discussed further plans. Jim was cautious about going to the house but was over-ruled.

"It will be all right to go up and look in the windows," Terry argued. "The man locked the door, and that's a sure sign that no one is in the place."

They approached the house carefully and looked in the back windows. The place was almost bare of furniture, but they did see a table and two ancient chairs in the kitchen. The rest of the house, at least downstairs, was totally empty. When they had made a tour of the place they gave it up.

"I doubt if there is anything upstairs," said Don. "I imagine this fellow whoever he is, simply comes here to receive messages from the hall, Perhaps at night they send them by flashlight. It certainly is a puzzler."

Rhodes looked at his watch. "Fellows, we'll have to hustle right back. We've got just time to make it for supper. I suppose we won't accomplish anything by standing here wondering, so we may as well beat it."

They retraced their steps hastily and rowed across the lake, where they put the boat away and went inside to wash up for supper. After the evening meal the four of them spent some time talking things over. Just before leaving them the senior said:

"Well, we'll keep this to ourselves. Whatever is going on may be all right, but I have my doubts. I think there is a baffling mystery right here under our own noses. and let's hope we can run it down. We'll have to keep it strictly to ourselves, though, or we'll spoil everything. Suppose we all keep our eyes wide open and see what we can do."

CHAPTER V

THE MAN WITH THE KEY

ALTHOUGH the four cadets took care to keep their eyes wide open they saw nothing in the succeeding days to help them solve the mystery which they had run across. At times they discussed the subject and made conjectures, but these generally ended in nothing, and there were times when they half believed that they might be making a mountain out of a mole hill. No news had been received as to the whereabouts of their missing colonel, and life at Woodcrest drifted on more or less pleasantly.

The arrival of a new cadet gave them something else to think about. One rainy day when the cadets were loitering about the halls waiting for the dinner call, a young fellow in his early twenties arrived at the front door of Locke Hall. He was very dark, exceedingly well dressed, and carried himself with a swaggering air. He carried a suitcase in his hand which was plastered with foreign labels, and a cigaret drooped carelessly from one corner of his mouth.

Gaining the center of the main hall he looked carelessly around. The cadets were standing in groups laughing and talking, and finally he hailed a third class main loudly.

"Say, sonny," called the newcomer. "Where do I find the sign on the dotted line room?"

Considering the fact that Bertram, the third class cadet, was at least a year older than the newcomer, the term "sonny" was something out of the way. Talk ceased instantly among the cadets and they turned to look. Mr. Bertram answered with easy courtesy.

"That is the door down there," he said.

The new man nodded easily. "Thanks, old bean. Information is appreciated, I assure you. Is the agony man inside?"

"I beg your pardon?" asked Bertram.

"Is the clerk or headmaster or whoever officiates in there?"

"I think you will find someone in there who will take care of you," returned the upper classman.

"I hope so. Somebody had better. I usually get what I want, you know."

Mr. Bertram didn't know anything about it but he merely looked fixedly at the boy. Totally unabashed at the looks cast in his direction the new-

comer walked into the office, where an instructor was sitting behind the information desk. The doorway was wide and the cadets in the hallway could see in and hear everything.

The instructor looked up as the boy placed his suitcase on the floor. "How do you do?" he said, smiling pleasantly at the visitor. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the boy. "Not an awful lot, I guess. My name is Vench, Raoul Vench." He paused and waited, but Captain Chalmers said nothing.

"My name is Vench," repeated the newcomer.

"Yes, Mr. Vench. Well, what can I do to help you?"

"Do you mean to say that you didn't know I was coming?" demanded the new student.

Chalmers shook his head, his glance growing more keen. "I didn't know it. Perhaps Major Tireson did. Are you going to register with us?"

"I certainly am," answered the boy. "My father sent your headmaster a letter and told him that I was coming. I should have thought he would have told you, so you could have been on the lookout for me. Yes, I'm going to be a member of your cadet corps and I'm here to sign up. Pass over the articles

and a pen, already dipped in ink, if you don't mind."

Captain Chalmers looked steadily at the boy for an instant and then his gaze wandered to the groups of cadets outside of the door. Suddenly he bit his lips to keep back a smile, a rather grim one, and then reached in the drawer of the desk, to take out some sheets of papers and a pen. With intense seriousnes he dipped the pen into the ink and then looked at Vench.

"Not cold, are you?" he asked.

"No," answered the boy, with a stare. "Why?"

"I thought maybe you were," returned the instructor. "You still have your hat on. And that cigaret, which will be your last for something like four years, is almost burned out. As there isn't anything in that waste basket over there you might throw it in there."

Vench looked closely at the teacher and seemed on the point of saying something, but evidently he changed his mind, for he took off his hat, threw away the cigaret and turned once more to the captain.

"What is your name, please?" asked the instructor.

"Raoul Mulroy Vench, of Murray Bay, Florida, lately from Quebec and points all over the world," glibly answered the youth. "Age, 22, color white, unmarried, nationality American citizen, though

French-Canadian. How is that for a start, general?"

"That is a very good start," gravely replied the captain. "I'm glad you recognized my rank, Mr. Vench." He continued to write for a few minutes and then looked up. "Have you any money on you at present?"

Mr. Vench looked knowing. "Im surprised at you, sir. I only arrive here and you want to borrow from me already! Yes, I have a few odd pennies on me. About two hundred dollars, I think."

"Hand it over, please, Mr. Vench. At the end of the year it will be returned to you. While you are here you will be allowed just two dollars a week of it, with which you can pay your expenses."

Vench threw back his head and laughed . "Two dollars!" he exclaimed. "My dear man, I was counting on that two hundred lasting me just for two months, and that would be stretching it. Is it a joke?"

"Not at all, Mr. Vench. Have you read over the rules of the institution? Surely you must have. You didn't come here without knowing the rules and regulations. The cadets here are busy with their studies and athletics and have almost no use for ready money except for mere trifles. Transport-

ation to games is furnished free and money is not strictly needed. You see how it is."

"Yes, I see," grumbled Vench, handing over the money. "I expected to have a good time in this place, but I see I am somewhat mistaken."

Again Chalmers glanced at the groups in the hall. "I think you will have at least an interesting time here, Mr. Vench. Now the next thing for you to do is report at the medical department for examination."

"The second nuisance, eh?" sighed Vench. "That'll be a waste of time, officer. I'm in tip-top shape."

"For the sake of our teams, I am very glad to hear it, Mr. Vench. However, the rules require that you go through with an examination." Chalmers beckoned to a cadet in the hallway. "Will you step here a moment, Mr. Sears?"

Mr. Sears stepped up and saluted the instructor, who returned it. "Take Mr. Vench to the medical department," the teacher directed.

"Very good, sir." Sears turned to Vench. "Right this way, sir."

Vench grinned and picked up his bag. "Right with you, usher. Thanks a lot, officer." He followed Cadet Sears down the hall, passing carelessly through the waiting throng. Captain Chalmers looked

thoughtfully after him, and then, after shaking his head, resumed his work.

The cadets in the hall had remained quiet during the conversation, every word of which they had heard plainly, but now that Vench was out of earshot they began to talk.

"Well, what the dickens do you think of that!" chuckled Terry, to the group around him.

"Well," drawled Chipps, rubbing his chin. "I don't just know what to think. You've got to give me time. This is the first time I've ever seen anything exactly like that."

"I'm afraid he'll have a whole lot to learn," smiled Don.

"If he lasts long enough to learn anything," nodded Jim.

"All in the line of duty," smiled Rhodes. "We'll have to help him lose some of his flipness and importance. What do you say, Lieutenant Sommers?"

"I'd say that the spirit of the corps will have a hard time sinking into him," said Sommers, as the bell sounded.

Mr. Vench was fitted out with a uniform that afternoon and little more was seen of him. But on the following day he began his career at Woodcrest, and that career furnished amusement and some an-

noyance to the cadet body. The boy was thoroughly spoiled and almost unbearable. Two of the seniors and Terry tried to do the right thing by calling on him that evening, in an effort to make him feel at home. Terry returned to his room and reported in high disgust to Don and Jim.

"My gosh, what a sample of misdirected energy!" he exclaimed in a snort. "We tried to be decent to him in spite of what we saw this noontime, but it was time wasted. Not that he was rude, but absolutely unbearable! Talks continually of his travels, his girl friends, who seem to swoon with grief if he doesn't write daily, and his ability to do all of everything on the face of the earth. I'm through. I'm willing to try to be nice to any fellow who will be halfway human, but I draw the line on one who spends all of his time praising his own virtues."

"Likes himself, eh?" inquired Jim.

"No," snapped Terry. "Bows down and worships himself. I'm afraid that boy will run aground on trouble hard."

"And yet," said Don, slowly. "I imagine he could be a very nice fellow if he wanted to be. Maybe he'll come out of his shell sometime."

"I'm glad you imagine it," retorted Terry. "That's as far as it is likely to go."

"All right, Terry," grinned Jim. "Hadn't you better study your history? Any man that will try and tell his teacher, as you did today, that Blucher wasn't at the battle of Waterloo, should brush up a bit, I think."

"All right, my boy, I will. The only thing that surprises me is the fact that Vench wasn't there, or related to Napoleon or something else. Maybe he was, I don't know. That fellow is thoroughly spoiled."

"A little too much money, no doubt," said Don. "If we give him a chance he'll get over it."

"Optimist!" said Terry, beginning to study.

Few if any of the cadets were inclined to take Don's view of Cadet Vench. During the following days he made himself objectionable in every way. Even in the drill he tried to show his superiority, but Lieutenant Sommers promptly checked him and after due and fair consideration reported his shortcomings. Major Tireson rebuked the unruly cadet and he had no more use for the precise lieutenant. But Sommers took great pride in the squads that it was his duty to drill, and the cadets, always inclined to laugh at the dignity of the fussy lieutenant, upheld him in his act.

Vench had few friends, and they were recruited

from the weaker element of the fourth class, with whom he was very liberal. It was evident that he had more money than his allowance and it was thought that he had either told a direct falsehood to Captain Chalmers or that he was getting it from some outside source. A small group went often to the town and ate plentifully between meals, but as it was not particularly the business of the cadets they commented on it among themselves and let it go at that.

One boast that Vench made was listened to with interest by the entire body of cadets. He was standing with the group of fourth classmen just before the study hall bell rang, and Don and Terry heard it. That morning Major Tireson had made a statement that most of the cadets thought unnecessary. He had forbidden them to have any spreads in dormitories at any time.

At various times during the year seniors and third classmen in particular held secret feasts behind fast locked doors. The practise was confined to the two upper classes, and while the colonel was there the thing was more or less winked at. If it became too flagrant he had quietly spoken against it in assembly and it was stopped, for the boys respected their colonel. Major Tireson, however, had de-

claimed fiercely against it and had threatened expulsion as a penalty. As there had been no night parties that year the notice was brushed aside more or less lightly.

"He needn't worry," Rhodes had said, briefly. "Until the colonel gets back we aren't likely to do any of the things we generally do, or have any fun."

Vench was defiant about it. "Half of the fun of going to school is in having midnight spreads," he said, in the study hall. "I've been to boarding school and I know. In most places if they catch you they warn you to stop it and then give you another chance. But this poky old major steps right up and threatens us before we even think of such a thing. Who does he think he is anyway? I'll tell you what I'm going to do: I'm going to put on the finest spread this school ever had pretty soon. My friends are going to see something that will go down in the unwritten history of this academy."

"Better wait until the colonel gets back before you do, Vench," advised Don.

"I will not! I'll do as I please!"

"Suit yourself," said Don, turning away.

"I generally do. Want to be in on it, Redhead?"

"Why, I think not," drawled Terry. "I don't want to be dismissed from here in my very first year.

And referring to the highly disrespectful way in which you speak of my blonde locks, don't you think it might shine out in the darkness and give you and your party away?"

"I think you fellows make me sick!" growled Vench.

"Sorry," said Terry. "Can I show you the way to the doctor's office?"

Late in the afternoon Jim and Rhodes obtained special permission from the Officer of the Day and went to the town to make some purchases. Special permission was necessary except on Saturday afternoons, and they lingered in town until it became quite dark. The days were growing much shorter and it was pitch dark when they arrived at the gate and walked up the path. None of the cadets were around and they started to cross the lawn when Rhodes pulled Jim suddenly into a clump of high bushes that lined the path.

"What's up?" asked Jim, quickly.

"Somebody just came around Locke Hall and is going toward Clanhammer!" whispered the senior.

Jim looked in the direction indicated and saw that Rhodes was speaking the truth. A man, his form somewhat indistinct in the twilight, was walking rapidly down the path in the direction of the silent

old hall. By peering through the bushes the two cadets could watch him, and they could hear his footsteps on the gravel. The man did not pause or look behind, but walked straight up the stone steps, inserted a key in the lock and opened the door. With a bold and confident step he went inside.

"Wonder who in the world that is?" breathed Jim.

"I couldn't make out," replied Rhodes. "But whoever it is, he has the key to Clanhammer Hall. There is no light in the place, so he must know his way around."

They waited for sometime, but no one appeared and the hall remained in total darkness. Rhodes looked at his watch.

"We'll have to go," he announced, regretfully. "We have to be in at six, you know, and it is ten of now. We have to wash for supper, so we haven't any time to spare. I'd surely like to stay here and see who comes out."

"So would I," agreed Jim. "But we'll have to go. If we could only see who it was we could perhaps throw a little light on our problem."

The two cadets returned to the building, checked in, and then went to their rooms. While Jim washed he told the other two of their discovery. Terry went

to the window and watched the lawn, but without discovering anything.

"We'll see if any one is missing from the dining hall," Don suggested. But although they took great care to check up they could learn nothing at the evening meal. Every cadet and officer was in his place at the tables.

"That leaves us one theory," decided Rhodes, a little later, as they talked it over in the boys' room. "Either the man got back before supper or one of the cooks or the janitor went in there. The question is: who, besides the colonel, has a key to Clanhammer Hall?"

CHAPTER VI.

RAPID DEVELOPMENTS

For the next few days nothing worthy of note happened. It was in the morning hours of a day on the following week that things moved rapidly. The boys had studied until bed time and had turned in when the lights were put out, not at all sorry, for their days, between study, drill and athletics, were more than busy. Life at the school flowed on as it did when the colonel was there. Mr. Vench seemed somewhat more busy than usual and made several trips to town, and Clanhammer Hall revealed nothing new.

How long the boys had been asleep on that particular night they did not know, but they were aroused by a sound that was entirely new to them. A furious clanging of gongs sounded throughout the school on every hall and stairs, and the cadets started up in bed with rapidly beating hearts. They had often seen the huge gongs out in the halls but had

never heard them in action. They were hearing them now, for they were being rung violently.

Terry was the first to bounce out of his bed. "Hustle out, you fellows." he called. "The school is on fire!"

Don and Jim lost no time in springing from their beds and reaching for their clothes. "Too bad they don't turn on the lights," he grumbled.

As though in answer to his complaint the overhead lights were turned on and the boys could see what they were doing. The sound of the gongs then died down abruptly, but a rushing, scattering sound told them that the cadets were all up and hastening into their clothes.

"Wonder where the dickens it is?" speculated Jim, as he pulled on his shirt. "I don't see any blaze or smell any smoke."

"It may only be a very small one," said Terry, who was now fully dressed. "I suppose we report in assembly, don't we? Or maybe we march out on the campus. One thing they have neglected to do around here is to give us any fire regulations."

Terry was right in his statement and the Mercers wondered if the oversight was due to the fact that the colonel was missing. Without losing any more time than was necessary to dress they opened their

door and hurried out into the hall. Almost every door was open and cadets were talking and walking toward the stairs.

The cadet captain of the third class hastened down the hall and saw to it that each boy was out of his room. With the rest of the cadets in Locke Hall the three chums went down the stairs and found the biggest gathering in the hall. There was no smoke or fire to be seen anywhere.

"Well, there may be a fire somewhere," observed Terry. "But it certainly ran away in a hurry."

"What ever it was, it was in the library," a cadet said. "I just saw the Officer of the Day and Major Tireson go in there in a hurry."

With one accord the cadets trooped down the lower hall and congregated at the door of the library. They noticed that the door was flung far back and that the lock was still sprung. It was evident that the door had been violently broken open, and as none of the cadets had ever known the library door to be locked, they were surprised.

A number of books had been thrown out of a bookcase near the panelled wall, and the major and Rollins, the appointed Officer of the Day, were looking closely at an old portrait on the wall. Impelled by their growing curiosity the cadets of Locke Hall

crowded into the room and around the two officers. Then they saw that the bottom of the picture, along the frame, had been slashed for at least five inches, close to the woood. The picture, an inexpensive affair portraying the celebrated "Thin Red Line" in action, was a familiar article to the young men, and they were at a loss to know why it should have been slashed.

"Very singular," Major Tireson was saying. "Let me have a full account of what happened, Rollins."

"I had finished my duties as Officer of the Day," said Rollins. "And I had returned to my room, unfortunately forgetting to return my report book to the office. I noticed the omission and was going back with the book when I saw the library door closed and a light coming out from beneath. I knew that there should be no light there at this time of night—or morning, and I quietly opened the door. Two men were in the room, one of whom was engaged in slitting the picture, while the other stood near the door in which I was looking. He must have heard me step to the door, for before I could grapple with him he had thrown his weight against the door and pushed me out into the hall. I heard the lock snapped into place and then I rang the gongs

to attract attention and get help. As you know, when you and I finally broke in, the men were gone, probably through the window."

"Did you get any kind of a glance at the faces of the men?" asked the major.

"Only a brief glimpse, sir. The man at the portrait had his face turned away and I didn't see it at all, but the man here at the door gave me just time to catch a fleeting view. He was tall and quite dark, but as he had a slouch hat pulled down over his eyes I could not altogether make him out. That is all I have to report, sir."

The major's eyes wandered back to the slashed picture and a puzzled look spread over his face. "I can't see what object any outsider could have in our picture," he observed. "It certainly isn't a masterpiece or anything of the kind." He turned and frowned slightly at the cadets who had listened with great attention. "You wouldn't say it was one of the men of the corps, up to any prank, would you, Rollins?"

"Oh, no, sir," promptly reported the cadet. "These were men dressed in business suits and civilian hats."

"Well," decided the major, "I suppose the men have gotten away; in fact I heard the motor

of an automobile as I came down stairs. This is most puzzling. In the future you had better quietly call me instead of ringing the fire alarm. I see that the cadets from Inslee and Clinton Hall are here, too."

The major soon after ordered them to their rooms, and the cadets from the other halls, who had turned out when they had heard the clashing gongs in Locke, went back to their dormitories, a confused idea of the whole thing in their minds. The students from Locke Hall went somewhat reluctantly up to their rooms, but many of them did not attempt to go to sleep at once. Each room held its own conference, and that occupied by the Mercers and Terry was no exception.

"Suppose it all had something to do with what goes on at Clanhammer Hall?" whispered Jim, as they sat on Don's bed in the darkness.

"I don't know what to think," his brother answered. "This happening beats them all, to my way of thinking. You can imagine some sort of an excuse for most actions, but who in the world could explain why two men should start to cut out a cheap picture in our library?"

They talked it all over and at length, but they arrived nowhere, so at last they went to sleep and

slept soundly until morning. It was an excited and interested group of cadets who assembled in the chapel that morning, and they waited impatiently to see if the temporary headmaster would say anything about the events of the past morning. But to their disappointment he did not and they went away to classes, to speculate all day on the mystery.

But just before it was time to report for drill, and just as the last class was about to break up, certain cadets appeared in each classroom and gave instructions to the teacher. In the class where the fourth class men were studying Captain Chalmers rapped for attention.

"Immediately after leaving this classroom you will report to general assembly," he announced.

There was a buzz and a stir among the cadets, and as soon as books had been put away they hurried to the assembly. An undercurrent of excitement was clearly visible, and they were eager for news of some sort. The major called for order and delivered his message briefly.

"It is not necessary for me to recount the details of what went on here last night," he stated. "You all know it, I am sure. However, we have learned nothing new, and while I am not inclined to treat the matter as of being of any importance, still I do

think we may use it for a little military practise. My thought is that for the next few days we will detail certain cadets to do active guard duty around the school all night. That will give you each a touch of true military life. The captains of the classes will tell you when you are to serve, and also give you your position. Any negligence while on duty will be severely punished. Assembly dismissed."

Drill followed, but what followed drill was not part of the schedule, though human and natural. A general buzzing and discussion took place all over the campus and in rooms. Most of the boys welcomed the idea of patrolling the grounds because of the novelty of it, but they were divided as to the major's reason. Could it be possible that he was really afraid? This question was more than the cadets could answer, and it furnished food for much speculation.

Don hurried into the room soon after supper with a grin on his face. "Well, I got it!" he announced.

"Got what?" asked Jim.

"I got my watch tonight," Don explained. "From eleven 'til twelve I patrol from the end of the campus to the east gate, up the hill and down."

"And while you are walking we'll be blissfully sleeping," smiled Terry.

"Oh, I don't mind, tonight," answered Don. "It looks as though it is going to be a peach of a night, with a big moon. I may be a whole lot luckier than you two, at that. You may get something like two or three in the morning, perhaps on a rainy morning, and I'll be the one to sleep blissfully."

"Say," spoke up Jim. "Your patrol takes you right back of Clanhammer Hall, doesn't it?"

There was silence for a minute and then Don nodded. "Yes, it does," he said. "I pass right back of it. From the edge of the campus I walk back of the hall, down the slope near the lake and to the gate. Yes, I'll pass the old place a good many times, I guess."

"Perhaps you'll see something that may help a bit," Terry said. "Be careful not to get tangled up in anything, though."

Don was compelled to go to bed until a quarter of eleven, when the Officer of the Day rapped on his door and in a low tone told him to report for guard duty. Both of the other boys were sound asleep when Don left the room and passing down the hall, went to the office. A cadet by the name of Arthurs was due to be relieved, and Don received final in-

structions. Then, taking his rifle, which the cadets used in drill, Don went out of the side door of Locke Hall to the edge of the campus and waited for Arthurs.

The cadet came across the campus from the direction of the old hall and saluted Don briskly. He said that there was nothing to report.

"I'm a bit sorry to have you relieve me," he smiled. "Although I'm getting tired of tramping up and down. Bully fine night, isn't it?"

Don said that it was, and after saying goodnight to Arthurs he commenced his patrol. His way led him across the grassy campus back of the school, back of the gloomy old hall and down the slope near the lake to the iron gate at the east end of the school grounds. He made his first trip and found that it took him a full five minutes from point to point.

Don rather like the whole idea. It might be quite useless as far as definite results went, but it was fun and a touch of the life which interested him. All of the boys would have to take turn at it, and he knew as he paced up and down that other cadets were patrolling on the other three sides of the school. He had been very fortunate in the time, for a fine big moon rode overhead, lighting the country up in a yellow splendor. The night was cool, but not un-

pleasantly so, and he felt his young blood stir and tingle as he moved along with a swift, snappy stride.

Each time he passed back of the old hall he looked searchingly at it, but it was deserted and black, seemingly wrapped up in its covering of ivy. Down by the east gate he lost sight of it, and it was a minute or more before he once more walked around back of it. Don had been patrolling for almost forty minutes, and was now down near the gate. Reaching it, he swung around and started on his backward patrol.

He once more came in sight of Clanhammer Hall and started to pass by it. His patrol had taken him some fifty feet back of the hall, close to some small trees, and he entered a patch of black shadows. From force of habit he looked at the old building and then came to a swift halt.

A file of seven men, bending low and obviously keeping in the shadows of the old place, was making its way around the corner of the building. Each of these cadets, whose uniforms Don could plainly make out, held something in his hand. Astonishment seized Don, and although he had a faint notion of what might be going on, he could hardly believe it.

But he knew his duty and he was quite determined to carry that out. It was evident to him that they

thought he was still down by the gate. Lowering his rifle he stepped forward and then stopped.

He thought at first that they intended to gather in some corner outside the building, but he found he was mistaken. They had approached a cellar window and the leader raised it and thrust his leg through. Don hurried forward, challenging them sharply.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

The seven cadets, with the leader half way through the window, started and turned. Don's suspicions were confirmed. They were all fourth class men and each one of them had a box or bottle in his hand. They looked foolish and confused, and glanced at each other.

"Well?" cried Don, as no one spoke. "What is going on here?"

"We were going to put on a good spread, Mercer," said a cadet.

Don was bewildered. "A spread, on a night like this, when we have guard duty?" he cried. "And almost at twelve o'clock. You fellows must be crazy!" A sudden suspicion came over him. "Tell me this: whose party is this?"

There was interval of silence and then the cadet

who had answered him at first replied. "Vench's party."

"I thought so," nodded Don. "Why did he pick out tonight and why this place?"

"Well," answered the spokesman. "He said he was going to put on a spread that would go down in history, and he wanted to do it in a spectacular way. Said he wanted to do it tonight, when there were guards out, and we'd have it in there, because nobody ever goes in there."

"Where is Vench now?" asked Don.

"Inside."

"Inside Clanhammer Hall!" cried Don sharply.

"Yes. He went in early to fix up, and we were to join him in there."

Don was taken back at the news. If there was anything to be learned in that hall Vench might stumble on it, and he was disappointed to think that someone beside himself had been in Clanhammer first. Well, there was just one thing to do and that was to enter the old school himself. He turned to the waiting cadets.

"You fellows get back to your rooms at once, and do it without being seen by anyone. I won't report you unless you disobey me. You've been a lot of silly chumps to listen to Vench at all. Why,

if you are caught you will probably be expelled! Have your spread in your own room if you want to, but you can not have it in Clanhammer Hall. Now get back, before I am compelled to turn in a report of this."

The seven cadets, glad of the chance to escape from an adventure which had begun to worry them, slipped away without a word toward the main hall. Don turned once more to the cellar window, prepared to enter the dark and forbidding place. But he drew back with a slight start.

The cellar window went up and was secured and a head appeared in the half light. Cadet Vench scrambled up and out of the window, his uniform covered with cobwebs and dirt. He looked briefly at Don and would have walked off, but Don grasped him by the arm.

"Here, Vench," Don called. "Wait a minute. Let me look at your face. What is the matter?"

He swung the cadet toward him and for a brief instant the other looked at him with wide eyes. Don almost gasped. The ordinarily brown face of Cadet Vench was white, his eyes were big and his hands shook. Don released his hold.

"What did you see in there, Vench?" he asked.

"Nothing," returned the other, dropping his eyes.

"Yes, you did," retorted Don. "Out with it. Let's have it."

"I didn't see anything!" snapped Vench, stepping away from him. "You let me go, Mercer. I—I want to get away from this place. You keep your mouth closed about it, too."

He strode away, and Don was strongly tempted to recall him and make him tell or suffer the consequences. But he was undecided as to what course to follow and he watched the cadet disappear in the direction of Locke Hall. Once more Don looked at the hall so near at hand. There was no sound and he wondered if he should go in or not.

But he did not feel like going in. Vench had seen something in there that had made him turn white. And for another thing, his patrol time was up, a thing for which he was not altogether sorry. So with this new angle to puzzle over Don went back to report his patrol over with and sought his bed, to wonder and speculate until he fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

JIM MAKES AN ENEMY

"THE thing to do," said Rhodes. "Is to make Vench talk."

It was a few days later, and the cadets were talking things over back of the boathouse. Rhodes, Jim, Terry and Don were sitting on an overturned boat discussing the thing in detail. Don had told them of the events which he had seen, and they were all agreed that Vench had seen something of importance in Clanhammer Hall.

But Vench would not talk. He blustered and he sneered, but he would not open his mouth. He began by saying that he had seen nothing, and ended by saying that he would not tell what he had seen. With that they had to be content, but they were far from being satisfied.

The period of preliminary training was now over and the boys in the fourth class were definitely assigned to divisions. Jim was the luckiest of all, for he was made lieutenant of the calvalry. Don remained

in the infantry and Terry went with the artillery unit. Jim was elated with his good fortune and declared that he was going to work hard for a captaincy.

To Jim first fell the office of Officer of the Day. At some time in the year each cadet served in that capacity. His duties were not complicated but consisted of the task of making the rounds of the dormitories just before the lights were put out to see if everything was in order. Immediately after they were out he had to walk down all halls and see to it that no cadet was still up. Then he was to turn in his report and return to his own room.

It was at a quater after nine when Jim reported to Major Tireson in the office and received his instructions and his report book. He found that he had been assigned to Clinton Hall and after receiving his instructions he went there. It was the practise at the school to put the Officer of the Day in another hall, so that no excuse would be made for personal friends if any infraction of the rules occurred. At the same time that Jim was inspecting Clinton Hall another cadet was inspecting Locke and another Inslee, in each case the Officer of the Day being from another hall.

Jim began his duties at once. Coming to the first

room in Clinton Hall he raised his hand and rapped smartly. There was a "Come in" from the other side of the door and Jim entered. As soon as the cadets in the room saw that it was the Officer of the Day they put down their books and rose, saluting as they did so. Jim returned the salute and then looked keenly around the room, noting the condition of the bed, the closet, the place of the cadets' hats and the general look of the room. Everything was in place and Jim placed an O. K. beside the number of the room. His duty was to inspect the room and report any irregularities on the part of the cadets themselves, but unless these irregularities were very flagrant the cadet officers never did report them.

"Very well, gentlemen," nodded Jim, and left the room. The two cadets resumed their studying and Jim went to the next room. In each dormitory room he followed out the same procedure. The first floor having been attended to he went to the second and repeated the process.

He had now come to the last room and he knocked. There was no immediate answer and he pushed his way in. To his surprise he found that Cadet Vench was in the room, sitting at the window on the sill, looking out at the ivy covered wall of an addition which loomed up close to his window. It

was then that Jim remembered that Vench, who had formerly roomed in Locke Hall, had been transferred, at his own request, to Clinton. Asked as to why he had obtained a transfer Vench had replied that the bunch in Locke made him sick and he wanted to be nearer friends. It was the boastful little cadet whom Jim was now facing.

Vench turned quickly at his step and his right hand went behind his back. But he was not quick enough to hide what he wished to. Jim saluted him and the cadet returned it. Before speaking Jim inspected the room and then turned once more to Vench.

"Your room is all right, Mr. Vench," reported the Officer of the Day. "But you yourself must be reported for smoking a cigar."

"You're not going to report that, Mercer," replied Vench, easily.

"No, I'm not," agreed Jim. "I am going to allow you to report it yourself, Mr. Vench. In that way you will save yourself a few "groan marks."

"Groan marks" were demerits, and if enough of them were gathered by a cadet he was expelled. If a cadet accumulated a few of them he lost valuable privileges. But Cadet Vench smiled and shook his head.

"I guess we'll just forget all about it, eh, Mercer?" he suggested.

But Jim shook his head calmly. "No we won't, Mr. Vench. Smoking is absolutely against the rules of the institution. You may enjoy it, and perhaps some of the other fellows do too, but they don't do it, and if you see fit to, you'll have to stand what comes to you."

"Don't preach to me, Mercer!" snapped the little cadet.

"I'm not preaching. If you don't go and report, I shall be compelled to do it for you. So make up your mind at once, please."

Vench's face flushed. "All full of soldier-boy dignity and importance, aren't you, Mercer? No sense of fair play or honor about you."

"Why, yes, I think that there is," retorted Jim, coolly. "I'm giving you chance to report yourself and lighten your punishment. Seems to me that I couldn't be any fairer than that."

"You could forget it altogether," cried Vench heatedly. "Look here, Mercer, I'll make it worth your while!"

"In what way?" asked Jim, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, I have a little money that the officers don't know anything about——"

"That will do!" snapped Jim. "A moment ago you were talking about honor! How much honor do you think is in a proposition like that?"

Vench took a step forward, his face flaming. "Look here, you—you cad! Do you mean to say that I'm not honorable? I'll have you understand that some of the noblest blood in old France runs in my veins!"

"That won't help you now," returned Jim. "As far as that goes, I guess my own blood is pretty good, although I'm not aware that any of it came from noblemen, unless they happened to be the only kind of noblemen that count, honest people."

"See here, you!" hissed the enraged cadet. "You only talk like this because you are the Officer of the Day. I'd mighty soon call you out if you weren't"

"I won't be Officer of the Day tomorrow," said Jim, coldly. "If you want to, you may call me out then, though I doubt if you will do anything as rash as that. Come, Mr. Vench, make up your mind what to do."

"I'll turn myself in," fairly shouted the little cadet. "And then I'll seek satisfaction from you, you high and mighty soldier boy!"

"Anything you please," shrugged Jim. "Do not

forget to report yourself, Mr. Vench, for I am going to make a notation of the circumstance, and if you fail to do it, it will go very hard with you."

With that Jim turned on his heel and walked out of the room. He was somewhat more angry than he had allowed Vench to see, for he hated the suggestion of a bribe and the manner of the cadet had been irritating. Just as he got out into the hall the lights were snapped out and he had one more duty to perform. He walked down the halls and saw to it that all doors were closed and all was quiet and then went back to Locke Hall, where he related his experience to Terry and Don.

"You did perfectly right," agreed Don.

"I doubt if he'll fight," said Terry. "He likes to make a big noise, but I don't think he will say another word about it."

But Terry was wrong. Cadet Vench reported his break in the rules and received fifty demerits. Two hundred demerits was sufficient to keep a cadet out of all activities and two hundred and fifty was the limit. Vench lost a few privileges and he was boiling with rage. That afternoon Cadet Willis, a roommate of Vench's, came into the room where Don and Jim were preparing to go out for track.

"May I speak to you a moment, Mr. Mercer?" he asked Don.

"Certainly, Mr. Willis," nodded Don, and followed him out into the hall. Terry looked at Jim and whistled.

"Ah, ha!" said the red-headed boy. "War is declared!"

When Don came back he grinned at Jim. "Well, you're in for it, old man," he said. "Cadet Willis brought to me, your second, a formal declaration of war. If you aren't scared to death you will kindly meet Mr. Vench in physical combat back of the gymnasium at eight o'clock this evening!"

"Well," grinned Jim. "I'm scared to death, all right, but I'll meet him just the same. I'll be so nervous I won't be able to run or study all afternoon!"

The news of Vench's challenge spread like wildfire, and just before eight o'clock a group of the cadets, constantly increasing in number, assembled back of the gymnasium. The spot selected was well fitted for the fight, as it was just back of a large window from which a stream of light came, and well out of sight of the main school building. Jim and his friends reached the place at eight and Jim immediately peeled off his shirt and moved his

arms about to limber them up. Vench had not as yet appeared, and when five minutes passed by with no sign of him the cadets began to murmer things decidedly not complimentary to the absent one.

"Here comes Willis," spoke up a cadet, at last. "But he is alone."

Willis, with a worried look on his face, approached the group, and ignoring the questions put to him, spoke to Don.

"May I have a word with you, Mercer?" he asked.

He took Don aside and they talked in low tones for a moment, after which Willis hurried off and Don walked slowly back to the group. There was a faint smile on his face, and he handed Jim his shirt.

"Put your shirt on, Jim," he said. Turning to the cadets he said: "Gentlemen, there has been a mistake made. When Mr. Vench asked Mr. Willis to be his second Mr. Willis presumed it was to be a fist fight It was not until a few minutes ago that Mr. Willis, to his vast astonishment, found out that Mr. Vench is very blood-thirsty. Mr. Vench claims that my brother insulted his honor and that nothing less than blood would satisfy him. He was was coming out here with two dueling swords, obtained from the museum upstairs, and it took Mr. Willis and some friends several minutes to disarm

him and take the wepaons away. Under the circumstances, there will be no fight, I guess!"

There was a moment of amazed silence and then the cadets broke loose in excited talk. Mr. Vench was treated to a verbal overhauling that left nothing to be desired, and many a scornful laugh was uttered as the cadets went back to their rooms. A dozen plans to annoy and remind the hot-headed cadet were immediately made up.

"Nothing but blood would satisfy him, eh?" laughed Terry, when they were back in their rooms. "Well, if he had run up against Jim's fist he would have been satisfied, all right."

Jim dismissed the whole thing and thought no more of the little cadet. But from that time on the noisy newcomer was in misery. Everywhere he went he saw some evidence of his rashness and foolishness. Paper swords were hung on his door, gentlemen in grotesque positions were sketched on the blackboards, engaged in dueling, and whenever he was around some pair of cadets were sure to fence with rulers or whatever they had handiest. He was angry and unhappy, but knowing as he did that he had made a sorry spectacle out of himself he kept quiet except when he was alone. He had lost the friendship of even his roommate, who felt his own

position ridiculous, and the loud cadet was silenced for the time being.

"It's all the doings of that Mercer bunch," he told a friend, savagely. "But I'm just waiting for my chance. Wait until it comes, and I'll make Jim Mercer and his gang suffer for this. Just wait until it comes, that's all!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FALL OFFENSIVE

ONE of the events that was most eagerly awaited by the cadets each year was the fall military offensive. It was designed to give the cadets, especially the newer ones, some taste of actual military work. Rhodes explained it all to the friends.

"The idea is to teach the necessity of unity of action between the different branches of the service," the senior said. "First of all, the infantry takes up its position with the artillery under cover just back of it and wait there until the actual shelling begins. The cavalry is stationed somewhere near to support the infantry, dismounted. After the shelling of a hill—we generally shell an old hill which we call Hill 31—the infantry advances close behind the fire of the artillery, meanwhile getting a message through somehow to the cavalry to dismount and fall in on the wings. I don't know how the message will be sent this year. Sometimes they send it through by telephones that the engineers put up and sometimes

they send a runner through the hill just before the bombardment or after it. When we take up the active campaign we don't use these uniforms, of course. We get into the regular mufti and go at it right. I guess we'll get to it soon."

It was a week later when Major Tireson issued orders that the fall offensive was to take place. The cadets were overjoyed at the prospect, for it meant three days of vacation. It was the custom then to camp out one day, drill on the second, and attack the imaginary enemy on the morning of the third day, returning home in the evening. To Jim, who was an officer of the cavalry, instructions were given.

The captain and lieutenants of the infantry, artillery and cavalry were present at the time instructions were given. There was no captain of the cavalry, for the last captain had graduated, and Major Tireson was undecided as to whether to make Jim or a cadet named Thompson captain. Consequently, both of them were lieutenants and equals. The major explained that the infantry would wait until the shelling was over and then advance on the hill. The artillery officers were instructed in the method and time, and then Major Tireson turned to the cavalry lieutenants.

"You understand, gentlemen, how you are to advance dismounted when the word comes to you?" he asked, and the lieutenants nodded. "Very well," continued Major Tireson. "Mercer, you are to have charge of the left wing of the cavalry and are to take up a position on the east side of Hill 31. Thompson, you will take your place on the west side of the hill, on the flank of the infantry, and you will send a man over Hill 31 as soon as the firing has been stopped. The artillery fire will be ended all in one burst, there will be no scattering shots, and it will be perfectly safe to send your man over the hill to inform Lieutenant Mercer to join the left wing of the infantry. We are going to act as though our telephone lines were down at the time, and the message is to be delivered by word of mouth. You both understand plainly?"

Both cavalry lieutenants replied that they did understand and after looking over maps they went back to rooms to prepare. Official word was passed around the school and campaign uniform were issued, together with "tin hats," trench tools and all the necessary implements. The artillery was brought out, horses prepared, and one brilliant morning late in October the three divisions marched away to the practise warfare.

Hill 31 and the surrounding country was twelve miles from Woodcrest and in wild country, where the danger of running across anyone was slight. The infantry marched first, the artillery rumbling back of them, and in the rear, leisurely, the cavalry unit followed. The spirits of the cadets were raised by the clear and sparkling air and the bright sunshine, and they marched with a swing. Terry, who was riding a gun carriage, laughed at Don when they all halted for a brief rest.

"Seems like Jim and I have the cream of the outfit," he grinned. "I ride a gun carriage and Jim rides a fine horse. Little old Donny walks along on his feet."

"I don't mind," retorted Don. "You and Jim will grow old and fat, while I will still be in my vigor, due to the fact that I used my feet. When you two are in your wheel chairs, I'll come around and see you."

Terry laughed. "That's how you talk, but wouldn't you just jump at the chance to ride!"

In the afternoon they reached a long, dusty plain, with Hill 31 before them. Here the cadets made camp. A small city of tents shot up into the air like magic, all hands helping. Four rows of orderly tents stood erected before nightfall, and then there

was a drill and review. After that the cadets were free to do as they wished, although no one was permitted to go far afield.

In the evening there was some running and wrestling and soon after supper groups gathered in tents. Very early the cadets were in their tents and taps was sounded. The night was cold and clear, guards patrolled the camp, and the boys were glad to get a good night's sleep. At six in the morning, they were roused from bed by the blare of the bugle and a busy day began.

There was inspection and roll call, breakfast, drill, and a long march for all divisions. In the afternoon the cavalry drilled on horses, the artillery cadets went through a rigid examination in sighting and range finding, and the ever busy infantry once more drilled. Just before they went to bed that night Major Tireson summoned all officers into his tent and gave final instructions for the shelling and advance on the following morning.

"But I have changed one phase of my plans," he added, turning to the two cavalry lieutenants. "I have decided, Lieutenant Thompson, that you will not send a man over the hill at any time. We will use the telephone connection, and you are to call Lieutenant Mercer on the 'phone and tell him when

to join the flank of the infantry in the advance. The reason for informing him is so that you will both form the junction with the infantry at precisely the same time. From your position you can see the infantry advance, which Lieutenant Mercer cannot do, and so it will be your duty to send him word to dismount and move up. Is that all clear?"

Both lieutenants agreed that it was and went back to their tents. Taps sounded and the young soldiers literally fell into bed and slept the sleep of exhaustion. In the morning they got up without enthusiasm, but as soon as they had washed in cold water and become wide awake they snapped into action with vigor.

Events moved rapidly after breakfast. The infantry swung into position, and with bayonets fixed as though for a charge, took up a position behind a low ridge in the field. The artillery rumbled into position and the cavalry left the camp.

Just before the cavalry left the camp Jim noted that Lieutenant Thompson was not at the head of the second division. While he was wondering what the trouble was the major came up and looked over the troops. He addressed a second lieutenant named Stillman.

"Lieutenant Stillman," asked the major, "where is Lieutenant Thompson?"

"He was taken ill, sir," reported Stillman. "It looks very much as though he will not be able to take the field today."

The major frowned. "Ill, eh?" He thought for a moment. "Lieutenant Stillman, do you understand the plans for the advance this morning?"

"Why, I believe so, sir," said the second lieutenant. "Lieutenant Thompson told me all of the plans the day before yesterday."

"Very well," nodded the major, turning away. "You are in charge of the west wing, Lieutenant Stillman. Kindly carry out the plans to the best of your ability."

He turned away, leaving Stillman flushed with pleasure at the unexpected responsibility and the cavalry moved forward, Stillman's division toward the west side of the hill and Jim's toward the east side. There was a troubled doubt in Jim's mind that he could not shake off.

"Oh, well," he murmured, as they galloped off. "I suppose Stillman is capable enough. I feel a little more confidence in Thompson, though."

Jim thoroughly enjoyed the gallop across the fields, and when they had gained their position they

stopped and waited, facing Hill 31. While they waited a unit of engineers, working in haste, strung a line from nearby trees to the place where Jim's cavalry outfit was waiting. This telephone line was in some places hidden in the grass and under the dirt and in some places up in the air. It communicated with the infantry base, the artillery headquarters, and went around in a looping circle and connected Jim with Stillman on the other side of the hill. It was over this line that the order to form a junction with the infantry was to be given.

Most of the waiting cavalrymen were looking at their watches, on the alert for the beginning of the artillery bombardment. It was scheduled to begin at exactly ten-thirty, and on the minute it began. The first gun roared out and a cloud of dust rose from Hill 31. The cavalry horses started and moved restlessly.

A regular series of detonations now shook the ground and jets of dust flew about the old hill. After the first furious discharge the firing abruptly ceased, to prepare a brief breathing space for a second discharge. This was a change in Major Tireson's original policy. He had given the original order to have one bombardment and then to cease firing, but the order had been changed and two dis-

tinct shellings had been ordered. After a minute of silence the second period of firing began, and this time it was more scattered and not so furious. The cavalry unit waited quietly.

"In just about five minutes we'll be on the march," thought Jim, calming his restless black horse.

At that moment the telephone box at his feet emitted a buzzing sound. Somebody was calling for him, and with a frown Jim swung down from the horse.

"Now how the dickens am I going to hear anything with that firing going on?" he grumbled. "And I wonder who can be calling me? I'm not supposed to receive any message now. Whoever it is certainly wants me in a hurry, judging by the way he is buzzing."

CHAPTER IX

UNDER FIRE

Jim picked up the receiver of the telephone and spoke into it, holding the earpiece pressed close to his head. "Hello," he shouted, above the din of the artillery fire. "Cavalry unit, Lieutenant Mercer speaking."

Somewhat faintly the answer came to him over the wire. "Mercer, this is Stillman calling. What in the world is happening? Why did they resume their firing?"

"That's all right, Stillman," returned Jim, thinking the new officer did not fully understand. "That was the major's orders, two bombardments, and after that you are to call me and tell me when to join the infantry."

"But don't you understand, man?" called Stillman, frantically. "I sent a man over the hill when the fire stopped!"

"What!" roared Jim, aghast.

"Certainly. Lieutenant Thompson told me the day

before yesterday that a man was to be sent over the hill the minute the firing ceased. I sent Cadet Vench over the hill and he must be right in the thick of it now!"

For a moment Jim's head reeled under the blow. In a flash the whole tragic situation came to him in its staggering reality. Stillman had the old orders, and Thompson had not given him the changed orders, probably because he had not even seen the second Lieutenant. The major had made but a casual inquiry as to whether Stillman knew his orders correctly, and because of the carelessness a cadet had been sent over that hill and perhaps to his death. Jim found his mouth dry and everything seemed to fade from before his eyes. Something back in his head told him to act and he snapped an order over the telephone line.

"Get word to the artillery to cease firing!" he cried. And with that he jumped to his feet and clutched at the bridle of his horse, turning to his own second lieutenant

"Townley," he ordered. "You are in charge until I get back. Foster, ride back to the artillery base and tell them to cease firing at once ! Ride like mad to do it, for Cadet Vench is on that hill that they are bombarding!"

Foster launched forwardl like a shot and thundered out onto the road. With a single leap Jim was in his saddle and had jerked his horse's head around in the direction of Hill 31. Before anyone could stop him he was off in a mad gallop toward the shell torn mound.

The shells were still falling raggedly on the top of the hill when his horse began to climb, and he hoped fervently that the bombardment would cease any moment. He could not see why it should not, for Stillman was to call the artillery on the 'phone at once, and Jim had even taken the precaution to send a calvryman back in the remote case that the telephone line would not work. He realized, as his horse flew with sure feet up the sloping sides of the heap of earth, that he was actively risking his life and that of his horse, but the impulse had come over him in the moment of revelation and he meant to go through with it. The firing would cease at a very short time from then, and the cadet might be injured, in which case he would have to be rushed to the emergency sick bay, which Jim knew was just back of the infantry base. In the flurry of the last few moments he had forgotten that it was Vench who was out there, but now he remembered it perfectly.

Jim felt the sweat break out on his forehead as

they approached the territory in which the shells were falling and his anxiety deepened. Hope suggested that Vench might have been on the edge of the hill when the firing began and that he might have rolled down and out of danger. He might even be back with the other wing of cavalry at the time, and under the circumstances it was not probable that Stillman would call a halt on the artillery fire. A new thought raced through Jim's mind. If Vench had indeed returned uninjured and Stillman had withheld the order to cease firing, he was simply running his own head into grave danger which would do no one any good and which would bring down the major's wrath upon him. But Jim felt that he had done the right thing and he kept on.

A shell bursting a few yards before him threw dirt up in his face and caused his horse to snort and rear, and Jim realized then that he was actually under fire. It was with an instinctive roll that he threw himself from the animal and looked dazedly around. The hill, now pit-marked from the fire, was otherwise bare, except for one growth of dead trees and bushes toward the middle, and it was there that Jim sighted Vench. The cadet was laying face downward, with one hand held over his head, motionless, and Jim, forgetting his own peril, ran forward, call-

ing his name. The terrified horse rushed madly down the other side of the hill.

Vench did not answer Jim's call and the cadet lieutenant ran toward him. Just as he had almost reached the inert figure a shell exploded back of him, and a short and thick piece of wood flew through the air, striking Jim in the back of the head. All went black around him and he pitched to the ground, over Vench's outstretched legs.

Although Jim did not know it, that was the last shot. The artillery fire died away abruptly. The telephone message had not gotten through to the artillery, due to bad connections in the stringing of the wires, but Cadet Foster had plunged like lightening into the artillery base camp on his horse. He shouted an order to the captain and then explained matters swiftly. With a look of horror in his eyes the artillery officer signalled frantically from gun to gun and the fire stopped with a final crash.

The infantry, the unit that the major was with, prepared to move up, thinking that the artillery had ceased to fire according to schedule, although the major knew that the firing time was still two minutes short. Foster rode to him, saluted and explained that Cadet Vench had started over the hill and that Lieutenant Mercer had followed. Don started and

his heart sank as he heard the report, which was made in the presence and hearing of all the foot soldiers. The major grew red in the face.

"What did Lieutenant Stillman mean by sending a man over the hill?" he roared. "He had strict orders not to do so! By George, I'll hang him for this!" He turned to his infantry captain, Rhodes. "Captain, accompany me to the hill. Lieutenant, take charge of the men here and send one of them for the ambulance. Come, Captain Rhodes."

The major and the young captain rode off furiously and an orderly hastened to summon the ambulance, which jogged across the uneven fields a minute later. The artillery unit stood quietly beside their guns, and the infantry and cavalry did the same. Don was very pale but perfectly quiet. Lieutenant Sommers looked briefly at the men left in his charge and then stood at attention, looking straight ahead, satisfied that they would carry themselves as they should.

The major and Rhodes had now arrived at the foot of the hill and they spurred rapidly up the incline. The cadets were all in plain sight, that is, all but the division which Jim had commanded, and the ones who could see were watching with an interest that was painful. At the top of the hill the two

officers jumped from their horses and hastened to the two cadets who lay so quietly under the stunted, twisted tree.

"Only stunned, both of them," said Major Tireson, after a hasty examination. "Is the ambulance here?"

"It is, sir," reported Rhodes, pushing back his trench helmet.

The major imperiously signalled the stretcher-bearers to come up and four men ran to them with stretchers. Both cadets, still unconscious, were loaded on them. Vench had been hit with a flying stone and Jim by the piece of wood. They were both placed in the ambulance and run quickly back to the field hospital. Don, watching all this from a distance, felt his throat go dry and his eyes smarted, and although he had a terrible impulse to break ranks and find out how badly his brother had been hurt he controlled the impulse and waited until the major and Rhodes spurred up to them.

"Just stunned, both of them," said the major, loudly, and Don breathed a prayer of thanksgiving. The major, feeling that something was needed to break the tension, and wishing to teach them that nothing must halt military activites at any time, gave

the order to advance, and Don felt a temporary relief in the action which followed.

Although the cadets obeyed every order which was given and everything was carried out according to orders the spirit with which the young soldiers had begun the day was lacking. The closeness with which they had come to tragedy had shaken them, and their minds were not on the words of command. After a mock storming of the hill they were marched back to the encampment, and no sooner were the ranks broken than Don made a rush for the hospital tent.

Terry was there before him and was sitting at the bedside when Don entered, after the doctor had given permission. Jim grinned up at him weakly and thrust out his hand.

"Hello, old man," he greeted. "Did I have you worried?"

"You surely did," returned his brother, with fervor. "How do you feel, old fellow?"

"All right now," nodded Jim. "I was just stunned, that is all. Terry was just a witness to a touching scene."

"What was that?" asked Don, curiously.

"Why," explained the artillery cadet, grinning. "Mr. Vench swore eternal loyalty to Jim!"

"Did Vench make friends with you?" asked Don, eagerly.

"Yes," answered Jim. "They took him back to school, because he has a gash in his head, but before he went he apologized and told me that he could never be sufficiently grateful to me. I was glad that Terry was here to save me from total embarrassment."

"Just the same," said Don. "You did a mighty brave thing, Jim, and I'm proud of you. You could easily have waited until the bombardment was over and then have gone up." He looked around and lowered his voice. "I certainly wouldn't want to be the major, because he is the one to blame. If he is sensible he won't say a word."

CHAPTER X

REBELLION

When the cadets returned to school and routine life was resumed the young soldiers were loud in their praises of Don and Jim. They admired the fortitude with which Don had kept quiet and calm when he had learned of Jim's plight, and they admired Jim's plucky action. And most of them were surprised at the changed attitude of Cadet Vench.

Up to that time the little cadet had been intensely disliked and he had few friends. A few of the students who knew him better than the others called to pay their respects to the injured man and they returned to tell strange tales of a completely changed Vench. He had lost his air of superiority and his boastfulness and he led the way in praising his recent enemy. His injuries were not grave, but he had been badly shaken and at the advice of the doctor he remained in rooms and did his studying

there. The gash in his head healed rapidly and he was in no danger from that.

He related his story several times and the cadets were greatly interested in it. He had just reached the top of the hill when the second round of artillery fire had started and he was scared and bewildered. He had started to run for the shelter of the trees, hoping that the fire would cease even long enough to give him a chance to roll backward down the hill. But as he lay there the stone had hit him and that was the last he had known until he found himself in the field hospital.

The cadets discussed the carelessness of the major in groups and in low tones and the general opinion was that he would say nothing concerning it all. But in this they were mistaken. The major was noted for shortness of temper and the fact that he was tactless was soon shown. On the evening following their return to Woodcrest a large group was standing on the campus in the light of Locke Hall when Second Lieutenant Stillman came out of the door and started toward Inslee Hall, where he roomed. Rhodes noted a look of dejection and anger on the face of the cadet officer and hailed him.

"Hello, there, Stillman," he said. "What's the matter with your face?"

"You mean the expression of it?" asked Stillman, ruefully.

"Why, yes," laughed Rhodes. "Now that I take notice of it, the face itself is all right. But the look that is on it at present doesn't draw any favorable comment."

"I've had a mean time in there," said Stillman, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the main hall. "Major Tireson reprimanded me for that affair at the hill."

"For sending Vench over?" asked Dallenger, a third class man.

"Yes," nodded Stillman.

"But you didn't take it, did you?" inquired Don.

"Why, yes, I suppose I did. I more or less had to."

"You did not," said Cadet Chipps. "The major asked you if you had received the orders and you said that you had received them two days previous. Instead of checking up on you to see if you had the correct ones he let you go on. It distinctly was not your fault."

"Well, he said it was, and he talked pretty hotly,

too, I assure you. Naturally, I couldn't talk back to the major."

"You certainly could have," retorted Don. "You didn't have to be snappy about it, but as long as you were in the right you should have stood firm."

"Maybe," shrugged Stillman, moving away. "But that's easier said than done."

Talk concerning the major became more pointed and it is probable that some of it reached his ears. At any rate, on that very night, as Don, Jim and Terry were studying in their room there came a knock on the door and Jim bade the knocker enter. The door opened to admit the major and all three boys rose quickly and saluted. The major returned the salute shortly and faced Jim.

"Mr. Mercer," he said. "I want to take this opportunity to speak to you. Do you feel well enough to talk?"

"Yes, sir," answered Jim, wonderingly.

"I just want to tell you that I did not approve of your rash act at Hill 31," said the major, excitement growing on him. "I understood that some of the cadets think you quite a hero and that in consequence you may become heir to a swelled head. I personally do not think that you did anything

commendable, and you greatly imperiled me by your foolishness. If anything had happened to you I would have been blamed. In the future you will be kind enough to mind your own business and stick to orders. You will perhaps recall that you had no orders to make any melodramatic dash up the hill in the face of the artillery fire. Do you understand?"

"I do," said Jim, his eyes flashing. "But I do not need orders to make me try to help someone out of difficulty, sir!"

"That will do," snapped the major. "You will find out that this is a military school and not a place where you can do as you like. I will place twenty-five demerits beside your name for what you did that day."

"Very well, sir," said Jim, calmly.

"Wait a minute, Major Tireson," said Don, with equal quietness, but with a determined look in the set of his jaw. "You will do nothing of the kind!"

The major's eyes bulged. "Silence, sir! How dare you speak to me when I am not even addressing you?"

"I repeat what I said," returned Don, coolly. "You will place no demerit marks against Jim's

name. We both expect to graduate from here with clean records and we will permit no marks to be placed against us unless we knowingly break the rules. Jim didn't do that and so you will not do what you said you will do!"

"Mercer," snarled the major. "I will order you under arrest!"

"You may do what you like," retorted Don. "But it will do you no good. Every cadet in this school knows that what happened is your fault, Major Tireson, and not anyone else. Every cadet is blaming Lieutenant Stillman for having taken demerit marks from you. You yourself know that you made no effort to check up and find out if the second lieutenant knew his orders, and under those circumsances Jim will not take any punishment from you or from anyone else!"

For one moment the temporary headmaster glared at him and then his tone became cold. "Report yourself under arrest, Mr. Mercer," he commanded.

"Certainly, sir," agreed Don, with composure. "Until tomorrow evening, and if you have not released me by then I shall leave the school for good!"

"Remain in your room under arrest, Mr. Mer-

cer," repeated the major, and turning on his heel he went out, banging the door after him.

"Well, what do you know about that!" gasped Terry, sinking down on the bed.

"I know that I'll follow Don out if he tries to keep him under arrest," answered Jim, briefly.

"He won't try it," promised Don, grimly. And a few moments later, when Chipps and Rhodes came in on a visit, they told him the cadets would stand back of him.

"In fact," said Rhodes, getting up. "I think I'll spread the word right now for a general rebellion!"

"Oh, you aren't going that far, are you?" asked Don.

"Absolutely!" said the senior captain, resolutely. "Major Tireson must be shown conclusively that he can't pull off a stunt like that and get away with it. That would be making ninnies out of the whole cadet corps. Jim did the right thing and we won't stand for treatment of that kind, as long as the major himself is the guilty one."

The two seniors departed to spread the word and before taps sounded the cadet body was seething with excitement. A definite plan was formulated and in the morning it was launched.

The cadets, with the exception of Don, filed into chapel in the morning and sat quietly down. The services went off as usual and then the major gave the signal for dismissal. A few fourth class men got up, but the senior and third class remained seated. Following their example the second class remained seated also.

The major looked at them in amazement. "I said assembly dismissed, gentlemen," he said.

There was nothing but silence over the entire hall and the major's eyes blazed. "What does this mean?" he cried.

Rhodes stood in his place and faced him quietly. "I have been delegated by the cadet corps to say that we will not return either to study or to drill until Cadet Mercer, of the fourth class, has been released and all blame for the campaign affair withdrawn from Lieutenant Stillman, and Cadet James Mercer," he stated.

"Oh!" hissed the major, when he had fully comprehended. "A school rebellion, eh?"

"We hope not, sir," respectfully returned Rhodes. "But if necessary it will be. The cadet corps has also commissioned me to say that all blame for the Hill 31 affair is to be laid directly to you, Major

Tireson. Here at Woodcrest we are taught that military service demands absolute efficiency, especially in the giving and interpreting of orders, and yet the biggest blunder, and one which might have cost two lives, has been made by our commanding officer. We feel that any cadet in the ranks, upon learning that Lieutenant Thompson was ill, would have immediately seen to it that his appointed successor had the correct orders, particularly as those orders had been changed. In the hearing of many of the cadets you were told that Lieutenant Stillman had received orders that were two days old, and yet you allowed that statement to go unchallenged. Under the circumstances the cadet corps feels that punishment of these cadets and the imprisonment of Cadet Mercer is an insult to our organization and will not permit it to go on!"

"A very pretty speech," sneered the major, livid with rage. "Sit down, sir!"

"We will now march to the breakfast hall," went on Rhodes, ignoring the order. "But we will not attend any class or any drill until you have complied with our request. We also feel that we are being lenient with you in not asking you to apologize to the cadets you have reprimanded!"

"You sit down!" bellowed the major. "You won't get a mouthful until you have returned to study and drill! Dictate to me, will you? I'll punish every one of you and show you how to obey orders quickly!"

"Any tactics such as those," warned the senior, "will be followed by the worst thing that can possibly happen to the school. Every member will return to his own home and remain there until Colonel Morrell has returned or until you back down in your stand." The senior captain turned his back on the enraged headmaster. "Corps, attention! March as orderly as possible into the dining room!"

"I'll have the food stopped and you won't get a mouthful!" roared the major.

"The minute you give such an order you will be put outside the building and the doors locked against you!" returned Captain Rhodes, quietly. Turning to the waiting cadets he cried briskly: "Get into action, gentlemen. Forward march!"

The corps marched impassively into the dining room and took up its place around the tables. The instructors lingered in the assembly hall for a moment, waiting for word from the major, but as none came, they joined the students in the dining room.

Taking complete charge of the situation the senior captain asked a blessing on the food and then the cadets ate a hearty breakfast.

Rhodes kept his eyes open during the meal, but nothing happened until the close when an instructor beckoned him to come outside. The senior left the room and the cadets waited while they finished their coffee. Rhodes returned after a few minutes and rapped for attention.

"The rebellion is over, gentlemen," he announced. "Major Tireson has agreed to release Cadet Mercer and to forget the entire affair. We will now return to our classes and drill in the spirit of the corps, if you please."

There was a slight feeling of disappointment on the part of the cadet body, but they went back to routine without murmur. Don was told later in the morning to go down and get his breakfast and report to his second call for classes. He did so, and later Rhodes spoke to him briefly.

"Our threat to leave the school was what finally tamed him," the senior said. "He wailed a bit about my disrespect and insults and so forth, but finally agreed to hush up the entire matter. You and Jim won't have any more trouble on that score."

"I guess not," agreed Don. "But I'll bet he won't love the Mercer brothers from now on!"

One murmur ran through the body of cadets with increasing force. "I wish that something definite would be done about locating our colonel." Lieutenant Sommers expressed it.

CHAPTER XI

VENCH BREAKS SILENCE

For a time things went on as usual at Woodcrest. The major kept to himself and had almost nothing to do with the cadet corps. He led the morning services and looked briefly on at drill times, but aside from that he paid no attention to them. His attitude, the new boys were told, was directly opposite to that of the colonel, who mixed in with them and shared their life in a spirit of comradeship. The major was not popular and his absence was not greatly mourned.

Once or twice strange men came and talked with the major, men who had the look of police detectives, but evidently nothing new had been learned of the missing headmaster's whereabouts. The four friends kept a close watch on their own account and several times passed close to Clanhammer Hall purposely to see if there was anything to be learned. But they did not find out anything until Cadet Vench broke his long silence.

The little cadet was growing more and more popular with the corps and was himself astonished at the change in his own life. He had never before realized that to be respected and liked meant everything in the world, and he was slowly learning what it was to have friends of the true sort. He had abandoned his over-wise attitude, was now devoting himself to his studies, and on the whole was living a vastly improved life. The Mercers and their own immediate friends helped him all that they could without being tactless about it, and it was to this circumstance that they owed the fact that Vench told his story.

He found the four of them back of the boathouse one late afternoon enjoying the declining sun and discussing sports. They were seated on the boat runway and the little cadet sat down beside them. They greeted him genially.

"Well, what's on your mind, old man?" hailed Terry.

"I want to tell you fellows something," returned Vench.

"Fire away," invited Don.

"I want to tell you what I saw in Clanhammer Hall that night!" said Vench, unexpectedly.

They sat up in genuine interest. "I wish you

would," said Rhodes. "When you get through we'll tell you why we are so anxious to know. Perhaps you can help us more than you realize."

"I hope I can," returned Vench, looking around to see that no one was within earshot. "Well, listen, here is the story. As you know, I said I was going to put on a spread that would make history in this school. We had set it for that particular night and then that busines came up in the library, the slashing of the picture and all that. We knew that there would be guards around the school and that it would be even harder to try a stunt like that, but I was determined to put it over, so I went ahead and made plans. And my biggest plan was to have it in Clanhammer Hall.

"At first I had planned to have it in a dormitory room, with the shades down and the cracks and keyholes stuffed—the usual way, you know. But just about then I got the idea that it would add to the romance or thrill or whatever you want to call it by having it in Clanhammer Hall. Some of the fellows told me that it was strictly against the rules to go into that place, it was a sort of mysterious shrine, they said, but that made me all the more anxious to have it there. So we planned it that way and I asked if anybody knew anything about the

outlay of the old place. No one did, so I decided to go in myself and look it over.

"Don was patrolling up and down when I slipped out of the side door and I waited until he got out of sight down along the lake front. Then I sneaked to the back of the old building and pried open a cellar window. I dropped down into the place and looked around—I had a flashlight with me—and I saw that it was an ordinary basement with old ash cans and a big furnace and coal bins, and whatever else goes to make up a basement. After a couple of minutes I found the stairs and went up to the top, where I didn't have any trouble breaking open the door and getting into the hall. I flashed the light into a room or two downstairs, one an old office and one a classroom that was mighty small, and I decided that upstairs would be the better place to go. We'd be safer, I thought, and so I went up the stairs to the second floor. The thing that puzzled me was this: I smelled cooking in that old place!"

"What!" cried the others, in a breath.

"Yes, real cooking, something with plenty of grease in it. I don't know just what it was," said Vench.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" gasped Terry. "I saw

the evidences of the same thing. Somebody is making a regular hotel of that place!"

"I had half a notion to go down and investigate," continued Vench. "But I thought I'd take a look around the upstairs before I did. I thought I had a lot of courage to go into the place alone to begin with, but when I got to the upper floor I felt my courage ooze away. One look I'd take, I thought, and then I'd go down again and come back with the fellows. There was a small room right off of the staircase and I walked in there. Once inside I turned on the flash, and found to my dismay that it was going out. But in the feeble light that came from it I could see dimly around the room, which seemed to be a small study, with a faded carpet, a desk and a couple of chairs. There was just one small window in that room, rather high up, and I determined to have my spread there. And at that moment my light went out.

"I snapped it a couple of times to see if it would go on again, but nothing happened. The room and the whole building was pitch black, and I was wondering how the old Ned I was going to get back to the cellar window. At the time I was bending over the useless flashlight, and then I felt the

hair on my head begin to crinkle up and pull. There was a faint light coming from somewhere, and a minute later I saw a beam of yellow light in the hall. It was the light of a candle, and it was coming down the hall toward the room I was in. Although my legs seemed stiff as boards I did manage to somehow drop down behind that desk and watch.

"After what seemed an age someone came to the door. The light had been moving toward me all the time, but I hadn't heard a sound. Now a candle in a tin holder was thrust around the edge of the door and a minute later an old man looked into the room. His face was long, his hair all straggly and his eyes were narrow and close together!"

"The same man I saw!" breathed Terry.

"He looked around the room but did not come in. I guess he was only suspicious, for after a little while he went away, as noiselessly as he had come. He went up to the third floor, judging by the way the light went, and I waited until I was sure he had gone before I left that room. And I assure you I left it in a hurry. I found the stairs all right and got to the cellar, where I got another scare when I saw Don looking in the window. That's what I saw in Clanhammer Hall, and of course we didn't

have our spread there. We did have it back in one of the fellow's rooms, but it wasn't much of a success, not from my own point of view."

"So that is what you saw there!" exclaimed Jim, drawing a deep breath.

"Yes, and I've been puzzled over it ever since. I kept it to myself and no one else knows it. Now let's hear what you have to tell me."

Terry told his part and the others filled in. Vench was impressed. "Something mighty wrong with that old school," he commented.

"Do you think we ought to tell Major Tireson?" asked Don, of Rhodes. The senior thought it over and then shook his head.

"No, I don't," he said. "That might clear things up and then again it might not. What I do think is this: we ought to go through Clanhammer Hall some day ourselves!"

"But not at night!" objected Jim.

"No, that would be foolish. In the first place, we wouldn't be able to see anything, and in the second place I am no more keen to prowl around there after dark then you are. We'll simply break in some afternoon, perhaps tomorrow, and look around ourselves. If we are caught there we can simply tell our story and say that we wanted to

investigate. We can't be punished much for that."

"No, I don't think we can. Do you want to go through tomorrow afternoon?" asked Don.

After some more talk they all agreed to break into Clanhammer Hall on the following afternoon and then they prepared for supper. The evening passed as usual and they went to bed. How long they had been asleep they did not know, but they were aroused by the furious ringing of the fire gong. With one accord they leaped from their beds.

"Now what is gong on?" began Jim, but Terry, who had raced to the window, interrupted him.

"It's a sure enough fire this time," he called. "And, by George, it's Clanhammer Hall!"

They rushed to the window. One corner of the old school building could be seen from there and Terry had spoken the truth. The back of the place was on fire and the flames could be seen curling up against the sky. Already the campus was dotted here and there with cadets who had run out, scantily clothed.

"Come on!" shouted Don, leaping for his clothes. "Let's get out there! We'll find out something important now!"

In less than three minutes the boys were out on

the campus and running rapidly across the wet grass toward the old building. The flames were mounting higher and they could see that a shed in the back, which was joined to the main building, was burning briskly. The roof was on fire and there was no time to be lost.

The major had arrived on the scene and had taken charge. Some of the cadets ran down to the boat house and dragged out the fire fighting equipment, consisting of a hose reel and some axes. A fire hydrant at the corner of Clinton Hall was used to fasten the hose to, and before long a solid stream of water was playing on the roof of the shed. Some of the cadets had started to form a bucket brigade, but seeing that the hose would do the work much more efficiently they stopped and all stood around watching. Rhodes was on the end of the hose and under his direction the fire was speedily put out.

Don, Jim and Terry watched the old building with interest, hoping to see someone show themselves at the windows, but there was no sign of life and soon darkness fell over the landscape. The major, who seemed anxious about the fire, saw to it that the rear portion of the building was well soaked before he allowed the cadets to turn off the

water. Rhodes offered to go inside and see if there was any fire inside.

"Never mind, Mr. Rhodes," said the major. "I'll attend to that." He took out a bunch of keys and went around to the front, where he let himself in. Some of the cadets, finding it quite cold outside, went back to bed, but several stayed to see if there were any further developments. In less than five minutes the major was back with them.

"No fire inside," he announced. "I thank you for your prompt work, gentlemen. I would have felt very badly indeed if anything had happend to the dear old school building. You may put the hose reel away."

Some of the cadets put the hose reel away and the major, on the plea that they would catch cold, ordered the rest of the young soldiers to their rooms. Rhodes stopped just outside their door and talked in low tones to Terry and the brothers.

"I'm afraid this puts our projected search off a bit," he said.

"You think it wouldn't be wise to go in there right away?" questioned Don.

"Yes, that's it. I am afraid the major will keep a pretty close watch on the place from now on, simply

to see that no one does go in there out of curiosity."

"You noticed that the major had a key, didn't you?" whispered Jim.

"Yes, but that, in itself, isn't so very suspicious. There must be some sort of key in the office here. But this is the suspicious part: I wanted to go in with the major. He wouldn't allow me to go. And he never asked how it got on fire or made any fuss about it. Now I'm more than ever glad that we didn't take our story to him."

Before any more could be said Captain Chalmers appeared in the hall. "All in bed, gentlemen," said the instructor pleasantly, and Rhodes hurried off to his own room.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PAPER CHASE

One of the oldest sports at Woodcrest was the game of hare and hounds, paper chase, the boys called it. It was the custom of those interested to divide into two groups, one to be the hares and the other the hounds. The hares were provided with canvas bags which they filled full of paper, and they were given an hour's start of the hounds. The hares dropped the paper as they ran through the woods, thus providing a definite trail for the hounds to follow. The game generally took all day, and the hares were supposed to arrive back at the school before the hounds overtook them. Each year the rivalry was very keen, and for some years past the hares had won. Veteran members of the hounds were out for revenge that year, and the three friends, as members of the running team, were welcomed to the game with eagerness.

One Tuesday was given over to the game, a Tuesday which happened to be Election Day, and those

who voted attended to that duty then. It was a holiday at Woodcrest and early in the morning the two teams met on the edge of the campus down near the woods. There were about thirty boys willing to play the game, which was strenuous in the extreme, and they divided up quickly. All had been provided with sandwiches, for the game took up all day, and the hares had the bags of paper.

Rhodes, Vench, Merton and Chipps were on the side of the hares, with a dozen other boys, and Don, Jim, Terry, Lieutenant Thompson and others were running with the hounds. Final instructions were given and the hares started off for the dark woods.

"See you fellows right here at nightfall," called out Chipps, waving to the hounds as they sallied out.

"Yes, we'll have a fire going to roast you rabbits!" returned Terry, as the hounds settled down to wait for their time to come.

The hares broke away on a slow run, dropping bits of paper as they went. If the majority of the hares were captured, the decision went to the hounds, but if the hares got a majority back in the yard before the hounds overtook them the victory was theirs. So the hounds waited for their word to go, impatiently. Thompson, who was captain of the hounds, had to curb their impatience. Some of them wanted

to kick a football around, but the leader put an end to that.

"We've got a long run ahead of us," he warned them. "If we go running around chasing a football we'll be winded and they'll run circles around us. Remember, this is our year."

It was a glorious November day and the hounds found great difficulty in remaining still. Overhead a bright sun shone out of a clear blue sky and a cool breeze assured them that they would not become exhausted from any undue heat. The leaves had turned all colors and the lake was a steel blue. Each young man felt his blood stir in him, and ambition surged high.

When the hour was up Thompson gave the word and the hounds set off at a loping run. They would be compelled to run faster than the hares, who had now a fair sized start over them, but they were planning to travel steadily and hoped to figure out short-cuts. That was the dangerous part of it all, for they might decide to leave the trail and cut across a hill or valley, figuring that the trail led there, and if they were mistaken valuable time would be lost. The paper trail was easy to follow, for the hares were together, but later on they would split into pairs or threes, and then the work would become harder

and the body of hounds would disintegrate. Except on the home stretch, when within a mile or two of the school, the hares never went singly, but always travelled in pairs and threes. That meant that the hounds split up into as many groups and pursued the hares in the same manner.

For about five miles the hounds pursued the hares in one body, and it was not until noontime that they found out from the trail that the hares had split. Down in the hollow of a swamp the paper trail went in different directions, and the hounds stopped to plan their campaign.

"Three of them went this way," said Thompson, pointing toward the east. "Billings, Barton and I will follow those three. The rest of you fellows pick up a trail and follow it. Well, we'll be getting on. Don't lag a bit, and we'll see you at the fire tonight."

The three cadets struck off through the woods on the trail and the other boys set about finding trails of their own. Terry and some of the others trotted away to the west on a trail and Don and Jim examined the nearby bushes. Finally Don straightened up.

"There's a pair running off in this direction," he said, pointing north. "Let's get underway, Jim."

He and Jim followed the trail, picking it up from pieces of paper that showed through the underbrush, and they tirelessly followed it for three miles, without coming across any of the fleeing hares. At a time somewhat past noon they stopped at a farmhouse and took a drink from a well, sitting down against the fence to eat. They did not spend much time eating, but as soon as the meal was over they hurried back to the woods and took up the trail in earnest.

The chase was leading them into a wild country, heavily wooded and broken by small ranges of hills. Very few houses were to be seen, and so far they had not noticed anything that would lead them to believe that there was a town nearby. It was not until three o'clock that they came to the edge of a clearing and saw before them a little country town. A single spur of the railroad ran through the place, six or seven small frame houses grouped near the station, and off in the distance they saw the roofs of some fairly good looking homes. Yellow, dusty roads wound over the nearby hills.

"Wonder what place this is?" said Jim.

"I don't know," returned Don. "The hares just skirted the place, judging by their trail. Let's walk down near the station and see what place it is."

Jim grinned. "I don't know why such a sleepy looking place has a station," he observed. "If the engineer happened to be looking the other way he wouldn't even notice the town."

They veered off the paper trail and approached the tiny station which was bathed in the late afternoon sun's glow. Don narrowed his eyes and read the sign over the structure.

"Spotville Point," he read. "Well, it isn't much more than a point, at that."

"Spotville Point," mused Jim. "Where have I heard that name before? Oh, I know!"

"And so do I!" exclaimed Don. "This is the town where Colonel Morrell got off of the train and was never heard of again!"

Forgetting the paper chase in their interest the two brothers walked up to the little board shack and examined it with interest. It was a one story affair with a small platform, a single waiting room and a tiny office. Through the screen the boys could look across the tracks and see the station agent inside, bending over a book.

"Don," said Jim. "The colonel got off at this spot, and he had a good reason to do so. Maybe we can unearth some clue."

"Maybe," shrugged Don. "But I imagine that the

detectives have been over every foot of the way. However, I'm willing to make a try at it. What do you suggest?"

"How would it be to talk to the station agent?"

"I don't know. Perhaps he's tired of talking about it already, but we'll attempt it. Nothing like trying."

The Mercer boys approached the window, which was open, and looked through the screen. As their shadows fell across the desk the agent looked up. He was a thin old man in a faded blue uniform.

"Hello," he nodded. "Ticket for where?"

"We're not in the market right now," smiled Don. "We'd just like a little information. I suppose you know all of the people and houses around here, don't you?"

"Hope so," said the agent. "Been station master here for ten years."

"Then of course you know them all," agreed Don. "You were working during the early part of October weren't you?"

"No," was the unexpected reply. "I wasn't. I was sick then, and Tommy Grady was taking my trick. I came down sick about October fourth and I just got around to my work again on the first of November."

"Then you were here on the third of October?" questioned Jim, eagerly.

"Sure I was. Why?"

"Perhaps we shouldn't bother you," said Don. "No doubt you have been questioned by the detectives."

The old man stood up, suspicion showing plainly on his face. He looked closely at their uniforms.

"Say, what are you boys up to?" he asked. "No detectives didn't ask me anything. What's your game?"

"This is the only Spotville Point there is in the state, isn't it?" pressed Don.

"Sure it is. But what——"

"Do you mean to say that detectives haven't been here to see you about an elderly stout man who got off here on the third of October?" asked Jim.

"Nobody's been to see me. As soon as I was took sick I went away to Spartenburgh to get well. They might have been to see Tommy."

"Look here," said Don. "We're cadets from Woodcrest School. On the third of October our colonel started for the school and for some reason he got off here at Spotville Point. He was never seen again. Now, you say you were here on the third,

and detectives say they have checked up thoroughly. How is it that they haven't been to see you?"

"I'll tell you why they ain't!" cried the old man, his eyes suddenly lighting up. "Me and Tommy has had an argument. He claims he was on here since October second, and I know doggone well he wasn't! He's tryin' to get in some extra pay, if you ask me. I know I was here on October third. Maybe they have been talking to Tommy."

"They must have been," nodded Don quickly. "But do you remember the man I'm talking about? Surely you must remember everyone who gets off here, and as that was your last day before you got sick, I should think you'd surely remember."

"I do remember him!" cried the agent. "A little fat man, yes sir! I remember him as plain as day! I—Oh, murder!"

He sat down suddenly and stared at the boys in dismay. They looked blankly back at him.

"What's wrong?" demanded Jim.

Without answering them the agent opened first one drawer in his desk and then another, searching around in them. At last he brought out a plain postal card and looked at it.

"Good grief," he groaned. "That little man you're talking about came in here and wrote out this

postal card. He gave it to me to send for him, but I clean forgot it. I put it in the desk to send off the next day, and then I didn't come into work the next day. Good grief!"

"Will you let me see it?" asked Don, trembling slightly and reaching under the screen. The agent passed it to him, seemed to hesitate and was about to draw it back, but Don, seeing his intention and reading the sudden thoughts which had surged into the old man's head, drew it to him by the tips of his fingers. Eargerly he and Jim bent over it. It was dated October third and had a brief message which read as follows:

"Dear Merton;

Receiver a telegram to drop off at Spotville Point to see Morton Dennings. Perhaps I can come to some agreement with him. Going on to the school from here. ELMER."

Jim turned the card over. It was addressed to "Merton Morrell, 95 Orchard Street, Rockwood, N. Y."

"The colonel's brother," said Don and Jim nodded.

"That is an important clue," said his brother.

"Yes," returned Don. "Do you know of a man named Morton Dennings?" he asked the agent.

"Yes, I know him by sight. He's a wealthy man who has a summer home here, out at the end of the town, on Blackberry Lane. But you won't find him now, 'cause he's gone back to New York City. The house is closed up."

"How do we get to the house?" asked Jim.

The agent turned in his chair and pointed down the dusty road. "Take that road as far as the cross-roads and you'll see Blackberry Lane. The house is down there; you can't miss it."

"Thanks," said Don. "It was a good thing you forgot to mail this postal, sir. Up to the present time there hasn't been a single clue, but this will perhaps mean much."

"Say, listen bub," called the station master, hesitatingly. "If—if—well, in case——"

"I understand what you mean," said Don, looking closely at the bowed old man in a new light. "Yes, there is a large reward out for the finding of Colonel Morrell, and I promise you that if anything comes of this clue you shall surely profit by it. Now we're going down the road and take a look at that house Dennings lived in. My name is Mercer, and this is my brother. If you should hear that Colonel Morrell

has been found from any clue you may have furnished you can write to us at Woodcrest and we'll gladly see to it that you are fairly rewarded. Thanks for your information and the card. Good evening."

Jim and Don left the station platform and the old man looked after them in some doubt.

"I wonder if I was a fool to give that card to those boys?" he pondered. "They look honest, but you can't be too sure of anybody these days. I hope they find their colonel."

He returned to alternate dreaming and shaking his head.

CHAPTER XIII.

VENCH IS ASTONISHED

Jim and Don hurried down the road in the direction which the old man had indicated. They knew that haste was necessary for the sun was sinking in the west rapidly and they were a long way from home.

"We'll have to ride back somehow," said Don, as they talked it over. "If we don't, the others will think that we were lost in the woods and will be mighty anxious about us."

"That's true," agreed Jim. "But it surely is an important clue we have run down."

"Thanks to the station agent, yes. I was lucky to get the card away from him when I did, for I could see that he regretted it as soon as he had let it go. You can't blame him. It came into his head that he could turn it over to the authorities and make something out of it when the colonel was found. I suppose he's been working hard all his life and a little wealth would mean a new world to him."

"Surely," nodded Jim. "Well, if we learn anything important we'll see to it that he gets what is coming to him I'd like to see him get it."

They came to the crossroads and found Blackberry Lane, a rutted road that ran back to the thick woods and came to an abrupt end there. A short way down the road they could see two old country estates, one of which was open and the other of which had been closed. They passed the first and walked into the yard of the deserted place. It was a large mansion in rather bad repair, with sagging porches and boarded up windows. Weeds grew in the front yard and bushes in the back yard. They tried to see something from the front porch but failed, and they made their way around to the back. Here they were doomed to disappointment also, for everything was boarded up.

"There is certainly no one in the place now," observed Jim. "Mr. Morton Dennings may be a wealthy man, but he isn't particular to show it up here."

"Somebody coming," said Don, jerking his head toward the house next door.

A man was coming across the grass toward them, looking them over as he came. He seemed to be of the type between a retired business man and a

small farm owner, and the boys felt no alarm at his coming. He hastened up to them and spoke briskly.

"Well boys," he said. "Are you looking for anyone? No one lives here now."

"Is this the summer home of Mr. Dennings?" asked Don.

"Yes. He hasn't been here since last September or early October. Do you boys know Mr. Dennings?"

"Not directly," said Don. "He is a friend of Colonel Morrell, who is our headmaster at Woodcrest School, and we were just looking the place over. You say that Mr. Dennings left here early in October?"

"Yes," nodded the man. "You come from Woodcrest School, eh? Seems to me I read in the paper that your headmaster had disappeared."

"He has," said Don. "We knew that Colonel Morrell was a friend of Mr. Dennings and we wanted to look at his house."

"Mr. Dennings left here rather unexpectedly," supplied the man. "One early morning in October, around the fourth or fifth, I believe, my wife and I heard a car drive out of the yard here and when we got up in the morning the place was empty. He came back later in the day and asked me to keep an

eye on the place for him until next summer. No one has been near the place since."

"I see," said Don. "Well, we're much obliged to you, sir. We'll have to be running along now. I might explain that we were out on a paper chase and lost our trail near here."

When they had left the man and were near the station Jim said. "I think something of importance will come from what he told us. As far as we know the colonel went there and then this Dennings left early in the morning, probably with the colonel. I hope we won't find any evidences of foul play."

"I sincerely hope not," replied Don. "I didn't want to say much before the man, because I didn't know just how friendly he really was. Now, Jim, we'll have to see to getting back to the school."

It was dark at the time and they went to the station, to learn that a train was due in a few minutes. Between them they had just enough to get them to Portville, and when the two-car train puffed in they piled gratefully aboard. When they arrived at Portville they were fortunate enough to obtain a ride to the school, and upon arriving at the campus they found the cadets all assembled around a bonfire. At sight of them the students set up a shout and Terry fairly threw himself upon them.

"Gosh, I thought you two were surely lost," greeted the red-headed one, in relief.

"Well, we did lose our trail," explained Don, as they walked up to the fire. "Who won?"

"It was a draw," Rhodes answered. "We were fortunate enough to split this year. An equal number of hounds captured an equal number of hares and brought them in. For awhile we hoped you had been successful, but when Powers and Cranmer came in we knew that you had been left behind. You've got just time enough to prepare for supper. Let's go, and we'll have a real bonfire after supper."

Later in the evening Don and Jim related to Terry and Rhodes the events of the afternoon. They were tremendously interested and impressed.

"That looks like something at last," cried Terry, hopefully.

"Do you advise turning everything over to the major?" asked Don, of the senior.

"I don't know," answered Rhodes, slowly. "I suppose we ought to, for we can't very well do anything ourselves. And if we are found out—I mean if Major Tireson or the authorities ever hear that we have important clues and have withheld them, we'll certainly be severely punished. Still and all I feel that you ought to wait at least for a few days and

see if anything comes up, and if it doesn't I'd turn in the material collected."

"The idea, as I see it," put in Jim, "is that we don't know who this Dennings is, and we're not likely to find out. But the proper authorities can find out and we'll be simply wasting time by holding back."

"Look here," interposed Terry. "Colonel Morrell's brother evidently knows who Morton Dennings is. Why not write to him and find out who he is?"

"If you do that," Rhodes objected, "you must first go and tell Major Tireson all about it, for he'll find out that we knew something and didn't tell him. I really don't know what is the best plan. Suppose we think it over and we'll discuss it in a day or so."

Don was not very well satisfied at the prospect of waiting, but he agreed to let things go for the time being. A doubt existed in his mind as to whether or not they were losing valuable time.

On the following afternoon Vench, Don and Jim walked down to town together. Terry was wrestling in the gymnasium with Chipps, and the three boys, having nothing better to do, and wishing to make some small purchases, gained the necessary permission and set out. They bought a few things

that were necessary and then Don led the way to a local ice cream parlor.

"Pretty cold for ice cream," he grinned. "You fellows want some?"

"I can always eat ice cream," smiled Vench, his white teeth flashing out in his dark face.

"Me too," nodded Jim, and they went into the store.

They took their places at a round table and Don gave their order to the man in charge. Then the boys looked around. A few men lounged at the counter but the only other customers at the tables was one pair who sat off in a corner. Don and Jim looked at them fleetingly, but Vench uttered a smothered cry and a look of pleasure passed over his face.

"Why, I know one of those fellows," he exclaimed. "You see the short man, with the little black moustache? That is Paul Morro, a painter whom I met in Paris. We went to the same school of art, and many times I went to see his quaint attic where he did his painting. I wonder what he is doing here?"

The two at the far table had been engrossed in conversation and had not seen the boys come in, nor had they looked up. One of them was stout and short and the other as Vench had described him.

The friends ate their ice cream, and when Vench had finished he pushed back his chair.

"I think I'll just step over and say hello to Morro," he said. "He'll be tickled to death to see me, I know. If I get the chance I'll bring him over and introduce him to you. Pardon me, fellows, for a minute."

"Surely," replied Jim and Don.

Mr. Vench arose from his chair and made his way to the table occupied by the two Frenchmen. They did not look up as he approached and he leaned down and touched the one named Morro on the shoulder, smiling in anticipation. Paul Morro looked up with a quick start into Vench's face.

There was not the slightest doubt that he recognized Vench, but no smile of welcome or pleasure showed. He stared for a long minute and then looked pointedly at his companion. The latter nodded and got up briskly, followed by Morro. Nothing was said to Vench, and in his bewilderment the little cadet spoke.

"Hold on, Morro. Don't you remember me? I'm Vench, that went to school with you. Surely you remember me?"

Morro answered him not a word, but turning on his heel walked away, the other man close beside

him. Cadet Vench stared at them in mingled astonishment and anger.

"Well," exclaimed Jim, in a low voice. "His friend may be tickled to death to see him, but he doesn't show it!"

For a moment Vench remained rooted to the spot and then he strode to their table.

"What in the world do you make of that?" he gasped, white with range. "I was one of the best friends that fellow had in Paris. He said he'd never forget me as long as he lived."

"He didn't forget you," said Don. "He didn't want to know you. There is something strange about his being here. Let's see which way they went."

The three boys hurried out of the store and looked up and down the street. No one was in sight and they walked to the corner and looked in that direction. The two men had disappeared. Realizing that it was a hopeless task the three boys gave it up and started back to school.

"I agree with you that there is something strange about his being here," commented Vench, on the way back. "And it must be something highly important to make Paul Morro pass me up like that. I think we'd do well to keep our eyes open from now on."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE POSTSCRIPT

Don had considered making a change in one of his subjects for sometime, and at last he decided to go and see the major about it. He waited until one morning when the cadets were marching off to their classes and finding a minute or two before studies began he went to the office. The day was cold and gray and there was a promise of snow in the air.

The major was not in when Don entered the office and he knew that he would not be able to wait long. The major's desk was open and a number of papers were scattered around, and Don wandered over to the rail beside the headmaster's desk to wait. He glanced down casually at the papers on the desk, noting that most of them had to do with school subjects. There was a letter there, unsealed, and in its envelope. Without thinking much about it Don looked at the name on the outside. Then he stiffened and looked closely at it.

The letter was addressed to Mr. Morton Dennings. There was no address number or town on it.

Naturally, Don was deeply interested. Morton Dennings was the last man who had apparently seen Colonel Morrell and it seemed strange that the major knew him and was writing to him. Don would have been glad to read the letter, but he had no intention of even touching it. The thought came to him that it would be wise to find out what the major knew of Dennings before turning over the evidence gathered on their recent trip to Spotville Point.

On the evening just before Rhodes and Vench had come to their room the senior had told them that Major Tireson was going away on a brief business trip. They had decided to wait for his return before giving him the postcard and telling him of Morton Dennings, and they had also decided to break into Clanhammer Hall that very night. As Rhodes put it: "We had to put off our first attempt because of the fire, but I see no reason why we should wait any longer. We'll just give the major time enough to get away, and then we'll take a quiet snoop through that old building. I think it is time we found out what is going on in there."

So they had agreed to make the secret excursion that night, and all of them were looking forward to

it. Don wondered what the result would be, and what bearing the major's letter to Morton Dennings would have on following events.

It was then that he became aware of the fact that the major was standing at a side door and watching him.

How long the major had been there he did not know. He had been so absorbed in his reflections as he looked at the name on the letter that he had not heard the man come in. The major bent one long sharp look upon him, and Don straightened and saluted. The major returned the salute and came forward.

"Well, Mercer, what is it?" the major asked, his tone a trifle sharp.

Don explained about the change which he wished made in his lesson and the major granted his permission. The bell rang and Don knew that he would be late for his class. As he turned to leave the office the major was standing at his desk, the letter in his hand. When Don reached the door the man called to him.

"One moment, Mr. Mercer."

Don returned to the desk and looked questionly at his superior. The major was apparently in deep thought and looked once at the letter. Then he sat

down, and keeping the pages well screened behind a book, took the sheets and read them over. Picking up a pen, he wrote something at the end of the letter, refolded it and sealed the envelope.

"Do you know the country hereabouts very well, Mercer?" asked Tireson.

"I don't think so, sir," replied Don. "Only in a general way."

"Do you know any of it across the lake?" the major pressed.

"I have been over there once or twice," Don answered.

The major walked to a window and pointed across the lake. "Have you ever seen an old farmhouse off there in the woods?" he asked.

Don hesitated. He was not sure whether the major was pumping him or not. But feeling that the truth would be the best course he nodded.

"Yes, sir, I have seen the place. I think it is the only farm on that side of the lake."

"That's the place," affirmed the major. "I wish you would do me a great favor, Mr. Mercer. I have had word that a friend of mine will be at that house today, and I want you to deliver a letter to him. I will excuse you from classes this morning and I

would appreciate it if you would take this letter over there at once and wait for an answer."

"Certainly, sir," said Don, wondering at the strangeness of the request.

"Very well," the major said, handing him the letter. "You may go at once. Remember, wait for an answer, and I would also appreciate it if you would not tell anyone that you are doing this for me."

"I'll do that, Major Tireson," promised Don.

"Thank you. You may go now, Mercer. Take a boat and cross the lake."

Don returned to his room, obtained his hat and gray overcoat and went down to the boathouse. He saw no one on the way, for all the cadets were in class. The man who was in charge of the boats was not in the boathouse when he arrived there, so Don opened the doors and rolled out a flat-bottomed rowboat and pushed it into the water. When he had closed the doors he got in, and pushing off from the shore sat down at the oars and began to pull for the opposite shore.

The day was bitter cold and he was glad that he had on his overcoat. A gray darkness lay over the entire sky and a faint wind swept over the lake. In the shallow pools at the edge of the lake a thin coating of ice was forming.

"Bet we'll have snow before the day is over," Don thought, as he bent to the oars.

He speculated much as he rowed across the lake, but he could make nothing out of the strange situation. The major had evidently decided on the spur of the moment to send him with the letter, but it was evident that he had been about to send someone with it, and whoever was to go was not to tell that they had been. The whole affair had an unusual look that Don did not like, and the fact that the letter was going to Dennings was another step in a case that puzzled him greatly. If Dennings himself was to be at the old farmhouse Don would get a good look at him, a thing which might come in handy later on. Although he was not sure that everything was as it should be, he was nevertheless glad that the major had picked him out to deliver the message. If he could definitely find out where Dennings was he could add greatly to their store of information.

He decided, as he beached the boat on the opposite shore, that as soon as he returned to school he would inform the authorities and the colonel's brother of all the facts discovered. By holding onto the card and what little they knew of the colonel they were delaying justice and the finding of the colonel, and there was no use in keeping things to themselves any

longer. He was glad that they had not taken the major into their confidence, however. He did not like the looks of things as they were, and it would be safer to carry their plans out without consulting the temporary headmaster.

He pulled the boat far up on the shore, hid the oars so that no chance wanderer could make off with them, and then turned into the woods. He had seen the farmhouse twice, once when they had seen the sunlight message from Clanhammer Hall and a second time when they had tramped through the woods. They had not gone up to it on that last visit, and from the outside it had appeared to be empty. He was sure of the direction and walked confidently on, enjoying the vigorous walk in the keen, cold air.

When he arrived in sight of it he found that it once more appeared to be devoid of any kind of life. There was no smoke rising from any chimney and the doors and windows were closed and barred. He went up onto the back porch and peered through a nearby window, but an empty kitchen met his view. He knocked and waited, but there was no reply, so he walked around to the front door and tried the same thing, with the same result. No one was in the house, or if they were they had no intention of allowing him to enter. Disappointed, he walked around

to the back again and paused to consider.

The major had expected someone to be at the place. Perhaps it was still too early, and although Don did not relish the thought of walking around in the cold and waiting, he felt that he should make a reasonable attempt to find someone. Realizing that it would not do to stand around in the cold he was considering the possibility of making a tour of the surrounding woods, when the sound of an approaching automobile attracted his attention.

It appeared in the distance and lurched in the rutted road, until it was driven into the yard beside him. The man at the wheel, the same tall individual in the black coat and cap, looked searchingly at him. He was a man past forty-five, with a weather-beaten face and piercing gray eyes. He looked keenly at Don and his uniform as he stopped the car.

"What are you doing here, son?" he asked.

"I have a letter for you, from Major Tireson." Don answered. "Are you Mr. Dennings?"

"Yes," nodded the man, and swung out of the car. He closed the door with a slam and took the letter.

"Major Tireson told me to wait for an answer," said Don, as the man hesitated.

"All right," Dennings answered, leading the way

toward the house. "Let's get inside. We won't get much done by standing out here."

He produced a key from his pocket and opened the back door, allowing Don to enter first. Once in the kitchen he locked the door, tore open the letter and began to read. Don stood a few feet from him, waiting. The second page of the letter, loosely held in the man's hand, slipped from him and fell to the floor, right at Don's feet. As the man did not move Don stopped and picked it up.

As he did so he glanced at it. His eyes fell upon the postcript which the major had written. His blood leaped as his brain grasped the import of the words. The message was brief but pointed. The postscript read as follows:

"P.S. This boy knows too much. Keep him a prisoner until you hear further from me."

TIRESON.

CHAPTER XV.

THE JOURNEY IN THE NIGHT

For a long minute Don stared at the piece of paper which he had in his hand. The words were perfectly clear and his mind grasped their import, but he was not able to realize what they meant to him. Dennings was looking at him, and when the man saw that Don was reading the letter a frown gathered quickly on his forehead. With a single swoop of his hand he snapped the sheet from the cadet's hand and hastily read the postscript.

Sudden vigor flashed in his eye and he raised his head to look at Don. But by this time the boy was ready for action. Before Dennings could move Don had stepped to the door leading into the other rooms. Seeing that Don meant to flee Dennings took a hasty step nearer to him.

"Here, you!" called the man. "Where are you going? Come back here!"

Don knew it would be useless to try and get out of the door back of Dennings and without answer-

ing the man he began to run down the dark hall that led to the front of the farmhouse. Dennings sprang after him in swift pursuit. When Don reached the reception hall which opened from the narrow passage he found that he had no time to try and open a door. Dennings was close behind him so the cadet turned at the foot of the stairs and ran rapidly up them. His pursuer followed unhesitatingly, and Don rushed into a bedroom in the center of the place and slammed the door. To his joy he found a bolt on the inside and he shot it closed just as Dennings threw his weight against the door.

"You open that door!" shouted the man, kicking savagely against the lower part of the wooden barrier.

"Nothing doing!" Don panted, leaning against the door. "You can't come in here, Mr. Dennings!"

There was a pause and then Dennings spoke up. "Well, never mind, kid. I was told to keep you a prisoner until I heard from the major, and that's what you are now. You saved me the trouble of locking you up myself."

"Seems to me like I did the locking," Don replied.

A key was thrust into the lock and to Don's dismay it was turned with a sharp clicking noise. A chuckle came from the other side.

"Just doing a little locking of my own," Dennings informed him. "You'll just stay where you are for sometime, boy. Don't waste your time calling or pounding. No one will hear you out here."

He walked away from the ouside of the door and Don could hear his footsteps going down the front stairs. He shook the door, after drawing his bolt, and found that it was tightly locked. Then he turned to examine the room, a task that did not take him long. It was unfurnished, and the two windows were boarded up tightly. There was only the one door and a single deep closet with a shelf. Otherwise there was not a single object in the room.

"Well, here's a pretty mess," reflected Don, in disgust. "Ran my head right into a noose. So the major is deeply concerned in all of this business, eh? Not a doubt in the world but what he knows very well where the colonel is, too. If I get a chance I'll certainly ruin their little game."

His blood was up and he set to work to find a way out of his prison. But after a good hour of searching he gave up. The door was solid and the windows were well boarded. The walls were solid and there was no other opening. He stopped and began to consider seriously his position. As there was no fire any place in the house he was beginning to feel

chilled through, and he fell to rubbing his hands.

Three hours passed in this way and it grew darker in the room. The only light which entered the place filtered in through cracks in the boards, and it was not until some snow drifted in through a crack that Don realized what was causing the darkness. The threatened snow storm had arrived and the sky was a dark gray.

Once more he looked around the room and his eyes fell on the closet. He opened the door and looked around the little compartment, but the walls were as firmly built as the rest of the room, and he had no hope of breaking through them. Then he looked at the ceiling above the shelf and a new thought struck him.

"Perhaps the ceiling above the shelf is not so strong as the rest," he thought. "Might as well give it a try."

The next problem was to climb upon the shelf. He tried the strength of the boards by hanging on them with all his weight suspended and he found that it would stand the strain. By dint of using the door frame for his hands and feet he scrambled upon the shelf and sat there panting for a moment, to regain his breath. Then he reached up and pressed the ceiling with his hands.

The plaster was soft and the ceiling springy. It was evident that a layer of lath was the only covering, and he felt confident of breaking through that. Sliding forward on his back he raised one foot and sent his heel crashing against the ceiling of the closet. The heel broke through the soft plaster and the wood above splintered loudly. A shower of powdery plaster sprinkled over him, but he did not care for that. Greatly encouraged he sent another kick and still another against the ceiling, until his feet had crashed out a jagged hole in the plaster.

Now he sat up and carefully removed the fragments which hung around the ragged hole. He had broken a place between two beams, an opening large enough to admit his body, and when he had torn the splinters away he stood up and thrust his head and shoulders through the opening. Although he could see very little he realized that he was half way in an attic, and it took him but a brief instant to raise his body and haul himself to the level of the floor. He stood up and knew that he was free, for the moment at least.

His next task was to find the stairs. This took him several minutes, for the attic was almost pitch dark by this time, and he had to proceed with extreme caution. But at length he located them and began

a careful descent. A door stood at the foot of the steps and he opened it and after a hasty look around, stepped out into the upper hall.

There was no sound in the house and Don made his way to the head of the stairs up which he had run a few hours ago. He looked over the railing and peered into the darkness below, but there was no light to be seen anywhere. Perhaps Dennings had gone away, and if such was the case he was free to get out of the house and make for the lake. He had no future plan in mind, but his sole idea was to get out of the farmhouse.

He made his way down the stairs with increasing boldness and arrived safely at the lower landing The windows in the downstairs floor were unbroken and not all boarded up, and if he found that he could not raise one he was planning to break his way out and to freedom. He tiptoed into the parlor and was making his way toward the nearest window when hasty steps sounded on the front porch. Someone stamped the snow from his feet and a key rattled in the lock. Waiting until the door was swung inward Don smashed the glass with a single kick and jumped the sill, landing on the porch with a bound. A startled cry sounded near him and he turned to run.

But the new-fallen snow proved his undoing. It

was of the slippery variety and his feet slipped. Before he could regain his balance he had gone down with a thud. Scrambling desperately, he managed to get to his knees, but it was too late. Someone loomed up from the darkness and grasped him by the collar.

"Got him, chief," cried a strange voice, and the grip on his collar tightened. With the quickness of thought Don brought his fists up against the chin of the man who had hold of him. The blow was a hard one and the man grunted in anger, but did not loosen his grip. The man who had entered the house ran up at that minute and Dennings grasped him by the arm.

"Thought you'd get away, did you, sonny?" asked the man, pushing his face close to Don's. "Well, we were too fast for you that time."

"You had better let me go," cried Don, struggling furiously. "This will mean a lot of trouble for you if you don't."

"It would mean a lot more trouble if we did," returned Dennings. "March him in the house, Dan."

Between them they pushed Don into the hall and out into the kitchen, where the leader lighted a candle. Don discovered that the man who had

captured him was a powerfully built man, with a rough, hard face and narrow eyes. He kept his grasp on the cadet's arm until Dennings ordered him to let go.

"He won't get away again, Dan," Dennings promised, as he looked Don over. "How did you manage to get out of that room?"

"I just walked out," Don replied, briefly.

"I see," nodded Dennings. "Won't talk, eh? Well, it is perfectly all right, son. We were just coming to get you anyway, so you saved us the trouble of going upstairs. I'll find out how you got out some other time." He turned to the man Dan. "I guess it is safe to get him over now, isn't it?"

"Yes," growled the man, rubbing his chin where Don had hit him.

"Then let's go," said Dennings. "Just keep a tight hold on him Dan, and if he tries to get away, you know what to do."

"You bet I do!" the man replied. "I hope he does try something. I'll pay him back for that crack on the chin with interest."

Dennnings lighted a lantern which was hanging under the sink and led the way out of the house, Dan and the unwilling Don following. It was snowing lightly at the time and Don found that the ground

was covered to a depth of two inches. The evening was clear and cold, and a keen wind was blowing. Dennings ranged himself beside Don and the three made their way through the woods side by side in silence, going away from the house and parallel with the lake.

"The snow will cover up any foot prints," observed Dan, as they went along, and Dennings nodded.

"See here, where are you taking me?" demanded Don, as they plunged deeper into the woods.

"You'll know soon enough," Dennings growled, swinging the lantern before him. "Keep quiet and come along, or it will be the worse for you."

Seeing that obedience would be the best policy Don hurried along, glad of the opportunty to walk briskly and keep his blood in circulation. They skirted the shore for a distance of a mile or more and then the two men turned abruptly toward the water. Just before they reached the edge of the lake they came to a dense tangle of brush and creepers, and cleverly concealed under this natural bower Don was astonished to find a low boathouse.

Leaving him in charge of Dan, who kept an iron grip on his right arm, Dennings unlocked the door of the hidden boathouse and dragged out a round

bottom rowboat, in which was a pair of oars. Dan pushed the boy into it and followed, and Dennings, after putting out the lantern light, took his place at the oars. The boat was pointed out across the lake, and under Dennings' expert strength and guidance headed for the opposite shore.

The night was now dark and the snow continued to drift down over the boat and the three men in it. They were at the lower end of the body of water, a part that Don was not familiar with, and it took them less than a half hour to gain the shore upon which the school stood. Don wondered if they were going to take him directly to the school, but as he could see no reasonable excuse for doing that he gave the problem up. When they had reached the other side they got out and Dennings led the way along the shore in the direction of the school.

They followed the shore for a distance of three quarters of a mile and the outline of Clanhammer Hall loomed up before them. They were making straight for the ancient building, and a sudden conviction came to him. In an instant some inkling of the truth came to him, and when at last they stood on the stone steps and Morton Dennings took a key from his pocket, his guess became a certainty. They were indeed going to enter Clanhammer Hall.

"Well," reflected Don, grimly, as the door was swung open. "We fellows agreed to break into Clanhammer Hall tonight, but it looks as if I would be the only one to get in, after all. All I hope is that I can break out of it once I get in."

Dennings pushed him through the open doorway, into the blackness of the school and stepped in himself, followed by the man Dan. The door was closed and locked and then Dennings again took his arm.

"Now I guess we have you where you won't break out in a hurry," he said. And then he turned and whistled loudly into the darkness.

CHAPTER XVI

VENCH LEARNS SOMETHING

Jim and Terry noted with something of astonishment that Don failed to attend any of his classes that morning. They were aware of the fact that he contemplated going to the major and asking for a change in his schedule, but why he had not appeared during the course of the first class they did not know. As the second and the third class came

and Don had not appeared, they found themselves growing more and more astonished.

After the third period Jim ran up to their room, to see if by any chance Don had become ill, but he was not in the room. His hat and overcoat were both gone, a circumstance which caused Jim some lively speculation. He was not there at dinner time, and after their last period Jim and Terry hunted up the major and asked him about Don.

The major looked interested and tapped his glasses on his thumb. "He was coming here to see me about a change in lessons, eh?" asked the major. "But, gentlemen, he never did come here. I haven't seen him at all. You say his overcoat and hat are gone?"

"Yes, sir," replied Jim.

"How very odd," commented the major. "He certainly wouldn't have left the building without permission, and no one gave him that, I'm sure. Wait until I call Captain Chalmers."

Captain Chalmers had not given Don permission to go anywhere, it developed. The major was more puzzled than ever. He went to their room with them and looked about carefully, but nothing was found.

"This is most unexpected and disturbing," de-

clared the major. "We must find out from town if any of the cadets was seen there."

A telephone call to town failed to lead to the discovery of the missing boy. It was with anxious hearts that Jim and Terry went to the supper table that night.

The news of Don's strange disappearance spread over the school like wildfire and the cadets dropped in to see Jim and express their sympathy and their determination to help if possible. It was on that evening that one lone clue was discovered. A man who worked in the kitchen told Chipps that he had seen Don go out the back door and head for the lake. Jim and Terry went to see this man, but he had no news but what he had told Chipps.

"He had on his hat and his overcoat," the man told Jim. "And he went down to the boathouse. That's all I saw of him. I only noticed it because I thought it was funny he wasn't in class. I don't know if he went into the boathouse or not."

The major dropped in to tell them that he had put off his business trip until Don should be found. Jim thanked him for his interest and thought.

"Oh, nonsense," protested the major, waving his hand. "I'm deeply interested in all of my boys, and of course I wouldn't rest easily until he had been found."

The light fall of snow, which the boys had looked forward to with eagerness, was disregarded in their new anxiety. It made the school and its surrounding hills a picture of beauty, but the boys were not in a mood to enjoy it then. After a restless night Jim and Terry again attended classes, but they did poorly and the instructors said nothing about it, knowing as they did what strain the young men were under. During noon recess Rhodes, Jim and Terry decided to push a vigorous search as soon as classes were over.

"It seems to me," argued the senior, "that we might be able to pick up some tracks somewhere in this snow. We don't know how far he could have gotten before the snow, but if he was traveling after it did begin to come down there are tracks somewhere and we'll try to find 'em. They may be across the lake."

"What would he be doing across the lake?" Jim asked.

Rhodes shrugged his shoulders. "What did he go away for?" he asked. "No one knows, but we do know that he went toward the lake, at least toward the boathouse. The very first thing we'll find out after classes is whether or not a boat was taken from the boathouse. I don't know what he would

cross the lake for but he may have and we can make a good attempt to find out."

Every cadet in the school had Don's disappearance on his mind and no one was more puzzled and interested than Cadet Vench. He turned the problem over and over in his mind and he longed to be of service. Back in his head the idea was firmly seated that he should be the one to find the missing cadet. That would give him a chance to even his score with Jim for his heroic act at Hill 31, and Vench decided to put his whole mind and energy to the problem.

So as soon as classes had ended that day Vench put on his overcoat and walked swiftly to the lake. It had not occurred to him to check up on the boats to see if one had been taken, but he planned to scour the edge of the lake front in both directions to see if he could pick up some useful thread. He was now walking along the shore away from the school, wholly absorbed in watching the snow covered ground, when he heard his name called. Even as he glanced up he knew that the voice was unfamiliar and had a slight accent to it. Then, a few yards before him he saw the man who had cut him dead in the ice cream parlor, Paul Morro.

Instinctively, Vench stiffened and grew cold.

Morro had evidently been taking a walk around the lake path and the meeting was quite accidental, and Vench, who knew Morro's love for nature in all aspects, could readily guess that the Frenchman was walking merely for the sheer pleasure of the day and the prospect of the magnificent view. Comparing the attitude of the man on the previous meeting his friendly attitude now there was something to wonder about and Vench was astonisheed that his friend of former days should so readily hail him. Vench bowed distantly.

Morro strode forward and held out his hand. "How do you do, Raoul?" greeted Morro impulsively. Then, seeing that Vench had no intention of taking his hand the artist hurried on: "My dear friend, forgive me for not speaking to you the last time I saw you. It was so totally unexpected, so much of a shock, that I could not speak or collect my wits. Won't you forget my rudeness?"

"It struck me as being a bit queer to treat me like that after the type of friend I have always been to you," Paul answered Vench still aloof.

"I know, my dear friend, and I apologize. Won't you forgive me?"

He looked appealingly at Vench, and the cadet relented so far as to shake hands briefly with him.

Morro fell into step beside him and they followed the edge of the water together.

"I had no idea that you were a student in this academy," Paul Morro said to him. "I often wondered what had become of you after you returned from Paris."

"I wrote to you several times," Vench retorted. "You did not answer."

Morro smiled, showing a set of unusual white teeth. "You must blame that on my artistic temperament, my friend," he said. "I meant to, but never got to it."

"I see," said Vench, evenly. "What are you doing here, Paul?"

The Frenchman hesitated. "I cannot tell you that, my friend," he declared, at last. "I am employed by the man with whom you saw me, and I am not at liberty to disclose his secrets."

"Very well," said Vench. "I don't want to know, if that is the case. Would you like to go back and look around the academy?"

Morro smiled. "I have seen quite a bit of your academy, my friend. Your headmaster is a most mysterious man."

"What do you mean?" asked Vench, stopping suddenly.

"What do you keep in that old building, that Clanhammer Hall?" Morro countered.

"There is nothing in there," Vench declared. "That is, there is nothing important. Some desks and old books and several portraits, that is all."

"Portraits!" cried Morro, eagerly. "Are there portraits in that old place?"

"Yes, there are a few. Why do you ask?"

"It is nothing," hastily replied Morro. "But I will tell you why I say your headmaster is a mysterious man. Almost every night he goes to Clanhammer Hall and lets himself in with a key."

"Major Tireson goes into Clanhammer Hall every night?" Vench demanded, now keenly interested.

"I have seen him go in several times," Morro insisted.

"How have you seen him?" Vench demanded. "What are you doing on the school grounds at night?"

"That I cannot tell you, yet," Paul Morro evaded. "I have a proposition to make to you, and then perhaps I can tell you everything. But I have been on your grounds several times and I have seen your Major Tireson enter the building."

"How do you know it is Major Tireson?"

"My companion and I have made it our business to learn who all the officials of your school are," his friend said.

"Look here," cried Vench. "What is going on around here? What kind of a game are you playing, Paul?"

"I can't tell you that unless you agree to do certain things for us," Morro persisted.

"All right. What do you want me to do? If I think it is straight, I'll probably help you," Vench went on.

Morro smiled. "If it is straight? I think you are more particular about 'straightness' than you were in Paris, my friend."

A faint spot of red showed briefly in Vench's cheeks. "I am more particular," he agreed, firmly. "I was never dishonest, Paul, but I'm more careful of what I do now than I was. I've learned a thing or two in that school. What is your proposition?"

"My companion and I want you to open the doors for us and let us into your school on any night we want to come in," Morro declared.

"Let you into the school!" cried Vench. "What for?"

"I can't tell you now. You'll have to have faith in us and do as we tell you. Later on we'll explain all."

"You'd have to explain right now before I'd do a stunt like that," declared Vench, with conviction. "I don't like the sound of that. Why should you want to get into the school at night?"

"I will not tell you," affirmed Morro.

"Then you will not get into the school through my help," said Vench, as firmly.

Morro's eyes flashed. "Do not be foolish, my friend. There is much in it for you, if you do as we tell you and keep quiet. Come, say you will aid us."

"Not in a game like that," Vench decided. "It doesn't look good to me, and I won't have anything to do with it. No, Paul, you can count me out. I'd do anything in reason to help a friend, but that hasn't a healthy look, and I'd rather not be in on it."

"You'll regret it to the end of your days!" snapped Morro.

"I don't think so," Vench returned, smoothly. "If I can't know why I am to play in a game like that I'd rather not play. That is final, Paul."

"Very well!" fairly shouted the Frenchman. "Then let me give you a warning! Mind your own business! Don't attempt to put your nose into anything you may see going on, or it shall be the worse for you!"

Without waiting for Vench to reply he turned and walked off, his eyes snapping with rage. The little cadet made a move as though to follow him and then stopped, lost in thought. Morro disappeared from view over a low hill and Vench stood still, his mind occupied by this new problem.

Then he reached up, pulled his military hat more firmly over his eyes, and started rapidly back for the school, a plan of action shaping into form in his active mind.

CHAPTER XVII

IN CLANHAMMER HALL

When Dennings whistled into the blackness of Clanhammer Hall there was a moment's pause before there was any answer. At last a faint light showed against the walls of the upper hall, and this gleam was soon followed by an old man with a candle. He peered down at them over the banisters, and after having satisfied himself that all was well and the parties known to him, he descended slowly,

picking his steps with care. From Terry's and Vench's descriptions of the old man seen in Clanhammer Hall Don was sure that it was the same man.

He flashed his light around upon them and then, without speaking, looked stolidly at Dennings. The leader pushed Don forward.

"Put this boy away for safe keeping," directed the leader. "Is everything all right with the other?"

The old man nodded. Turning around he led the way up the stairs, Don just back of him and the two men following. When they reached the broad hall on the second floor the old man halted outside of a heavy door and drew a key from his pocket. He inserted it in the lock and opened the door, holding the candle above his head. He turned his dull eyes upon the cadet and motioned toward the room with his head.

"That room is all right, is it?" questioned Dennings. "This boy is a slippery lad, Elmo."

"He won't get out of there," said the old man, in a high voice.

"All right," nodded Dennings. "Get in there, son, and if you're wise, keep quiet. It won't do you any good to make a noise, but it might be annoying,

and if it gets too much so you're likely to receive a gentle tap on the head to keep you quiet."

Realizing that all talk would be a waste of time Don walked into the small room and the door was slammed after him. He heard the key turned and then found himself in total darkness. The footsteps of the men receded down the hall and a heavy silence closed around him.

When he was sure that they had all gone he felt his way around the room but it was totally empty. Blank walls met his groping fingers and there was not even a chair anywhere in the place. To all intents and purposes it was an empty room, and he gave up trying to find his way out.

"Might as well wait until daybreak," he decided. "There may be some light in here then, although I don't know where it will come from. Lucky thing for me it isn't very cold in here."

Although it was certain that there was no fire in Clanhammer Hall the building seemed warm, and Don was in no danger of being cold. He was hungry and sleepy, and realizing that a good sleep would fit him for the problem of the morrow he took off his hat and rolled his overcoat more closely

around him. The floor made a hard bed but he was not in a mood to complain about that.

"I can't understand their game," he reflected, just before he fell asleep. "Here they have me right under the noses of my friends and yet there isn't a chance of my rescue unless the boys carry out their plan and break in the place. That isn't likely now that they have discovered my absense. Of all the high-handed games, this beats 'em all."

Don had no trouble sleeping. The events of the day had completely worn him out, and in spite of the unusualness of the situation he slept soundly. It was broad daylight when he awoke, and his first sensation upon awakening was that of hunger.

A faint light entered the room from a very high and dirty skylight, and Don saw at once that there was no use in looking in that direction for a possible outlet. The skylight was too high for him to reach and there was nothing upon which to stand. His impressions of the previous night were confirmed, the room was empty and had no windows. It had evidently been a small classroom at one time, for two sides of the wall were composed of blackboards.

But Don was not discouraged by the outlook. He

stooped down and examined the board walls under the blackboards. Clanhammer Hall was a very old building and the passing of the years had not improved it any. He noted with interest that the walls close to the floor were made of light wood and that the wood was dry and warped. It was with a thrill of hope that he took his pocket knife out and without wasting a moment of time, began a determined attack on the thin boards.

He was far more lucky than he had dared to hope. The boarding had originally been secured with light nails which had almost no heads at all, and it was a simple job to spring them out and away from the supporting beams, which ran vertically. In less than a half hour the cadet had a dozen boards torn out of the wall, and an opening large enough to admit his body had been made.

There were still the boards on the other side of the beams to be reckoned with, but Don found that he had no trouble with them. By pushing he forced them out into the adjoining room, taking care not to make much noise, and before long he had opened a regular tunnel for himself. Picking up his hat he forced his body through and stepped out into a larger classroom, for the moment at least, free.

He listened intently, but there was no sound in the building and he made his way into the hall. He was undecided as to whether to try to sneak down and gain his liberty or to make a dash for it. Perhaps Dennings was still in the place, and if so he stood in grave danger. He had no fear but what he could overcome the old man if need be, but he was sure that Dennings would not leave the old man alone. Somewhere in the place there was protection for the keeper, and Don was not disposed to run any risks.

He decided then to steal quietly out of the place and make his way on tiptoe to the head of the stairs. No sooner had he poked his head over the railing than he drew back in swift alarm. The old man was in the lower hall, seated at an old desk, deeply engrossed in a newspaper, which he had spread out before him. It was useless to think of getting out that way, and Don was sure that there were no other stairs in the building. Although it looked as though there was no one with the old man he felt that such was not the case, and he was puzzled as to what course to pursue now.

It came to him that perhaps he could drop out of some window onto a roof or even into the snow,

and so get a running start. Perhaps there was some rain pipe that he could climb down and reach the ground without injury. The windows in the hall were pretty high, he noted, and would be hard to raise without making some kind of a noise. Well, there was nothing left to do but to try it and trust to luck.

Using extreme caution he made his way to the windows and looked out of them. They were all high above the ground and it was useless to risk a bad fall that way. Moving by inches he went down the back part of the hall, in hopes of finding something more promising there, but he was disappointed in that as he had been in the front.

The windows were all so high above the ground that a drop would almost certainly injure him badly.

He was now in a state of anxious perplexity. It would be possible to hide somewhere and wait for a more opportune moment, but he hated to lose time and it was a risk in itself. No doubt the old man knew every nook and corner in Clanhammer Hall, and his hiding place, wherever he might find one, would not serve him at all. It was while he was puzzling over his problem that he thought of the third floor and a possible escape along the roof.

There must be a third floor of some sort in the building and he turned his attention to finding stairs. After a time he located a door in the rear of the hall and when he had opend it a flight of abrupt steps was disclosed to him. He listened for a moment before ascending, not wishing to walk straight into someone on the third floor, but there was no sound from above, and after closing the door carefully behind him he began to climb, listening intently. He gained the top of the boxed-in flight and looked around him.

He was in a general hall which ran the length of the building and from which doors opened on either side. It occurred to him that when Clanhammer Hall was the main and only building of Woodcrest School some of the students boarded at the school and some of them down in the town. The first floor must of necessity have been given over to the dining room, kitchen and offices, the second floor to the classrooms and this third floor to the few dormitory rooms which the old school boasted. There were at least twenty small rooms opening off from the hall in which he stood, and it was in these rooms that the few fortunate students lived. No doubt the seniors or third class men slept

there and the lower class men were compelled to put up at friendly boarding houses nearby. The student body must have been very small at the time and the one building had been big enough to take care of the members of the student body of the upper classes. The doors were warped and initial scarred and faint yellow numbers still showed on the outsides of the doors.

At each end of the hall two windows allowed light to enter, and they were the only openings with the exception of a rusted skylight directly overhead. He walked to the windows facing the new buildings of the school and looked out, to find that no shed or roof was underneath. Nothing but a sheer drop was before him, and help from that source was out of the question. There was a new possibility which entered his head as he looked out on Clinton Hall and a corner of Locke. If the worst came to pass he would try to signal to some of the cadets, none of whom seemed to be around at the present moment. Glancing at his watch Don saw that it was yet too early for them to be stirring, and no signals were likely to be seen for some time.

He then made his way to the windows at the opposite end, stopping at the stairs to listen, but no

sound broke the stillness and he went on. Those two windows overlooked a portion of the lake and the gate at the end of the school grounds and the deserted edges of the woods. There would be no help in that direction, he knew, and he turned away from them.

"Looks like I'd have to set the place on fire to get out," he grumbled. "Now I'll look into some of these old dormitories."

He began to try the knobs on the doors but to his intense disappointment every door was tightly locked. The circumstance puzzled him greatly. All of the rooms on the second floor were unlocked and open, but these rooms had been carefully closed up. He felt sure that there was nothing in them, and why anyone should be particular enough to lock them he could not see He had tried them all and in haste, so that one feature of a certain room escaped his attention. In the center of the hall was one dormitory which, judging by the distance between doors, was larger than others, and this door, he subsequently discovered, was locked with a special lock on the outside.

The other and smaller rooms had been locked with a key in the ordinary manner, but the large

dormitory room had been fitted with a padlock on the outside and was locked in that manner. He stooped and looked through the keyhole, but his vision was limited to a blank wall on the other side of the room. Then something began to puzzle him and he sniffed, his attention growing as he did so. After a time the truth was forced upon him.

Someone in that room was smoking tobacco. He could smell it plainly.

His first impulse was to flee and then he stopped to consider, his gaze fixed on the lock. Whoever was in that room was a prisoner. No one would enter a room and request that he be padlocked in, and it was plain that the padlock was meant for business. He tried it, pulling at it with all his strength, but it was tightly locked and his efforts were useless. Bending down, he once more examined it, and then, satisfied that he could remove it with his knife, began to work at it.

There was a sudden movement in the room as he started to work, but Don paid no attention, and as no one spoke he did not waste his time in speech. The lock itself was screwed into the door, and the screws were so placed that his knife blade, blunted by much use, formed a screw driver that

was effective. He did not have any unusual difficulty and the screws came out readily enough under his urging. With patience and speed he extracted four of the screws and the lock hung open, the portion on the post being freed. Hoping that the lock under the knob had not also been turned Don tried the door handle. To his relief it turned and the door opened.

Pushing it open wide before him Don stepped into the large dormitory.

CHAPTER XVIII

DON MEETS THE COLONEL

Don stepped fully into the room, his eyes and nerves alert for whatever emergency which might arise. He found himself facing a short and slightly stout man, who was standing beside a morris chair, a newspaper in his hand and a curved pipe in his mouth. The pipe seemed to have gone out and the man was staring toward Don intently.

The room was furnished with a bed, a table upon

which rested a few books, and a large armchair. An iron stove took up one corner of the room, and a fire had been lighted and was crackling in it. Two small and high windows gave light in the room, and the windows had been heavily barred. Don took in the room in a sweeping glance and looked once more at the man.

An expression of mingled relief and anxiety was on the man's face and he stepped forward, dropping his paper.

"Who are you, boy?" he asked, his voice slightly hoarse. "What are you doing here?"

"Are—are you Colonel Morrell?" gasped Don, a flash of inspiration sweeping over him.

"Yes!" replied the man, eagerly. "Have you come to rescue me at last? Is the story out?"

"I'm sorry to say that I may not be able to help you much, colonel," returned Don, closing the door behind him. He looked searchingly at the colonel, the subject of so much thought and conjecture for the last two months. "I'm a prisoner here myself, and I just escaped from a room on the second floor. I guess I stumbled on their game and they took me in, too."

"Just the same, I'm mighty glad to see you,"

cried the colonel, seizing his hands. "What is your name, my boy?"

"Don Mercer, sir. I'm a fourth class man, and we've been greatly concerned about your absence at the school. Have you been right here all along, Colonel Morrell?"

"Every bit of the time," nodded the stout colonel. "Clever piece of business, wasn't it, that of hiding me where no one would have thought of looking for me?"

"It certainly was," Don agreed. "Shall we try and make a dash for it, Colonel Morrell?"

But the colonel shook his head, running his hand through his thick gray hair. "I'm afraid it is no use, my boy. That old man's never left alone, and we would waste time by trying it. Let's think up a better plan. Have you had anything to eat?"

"No," said Don.

The colonel hurried to the center table and opened a drawer, from which he took a sandwich wrapped in paper. "Here is a sandwich that was left over from my supper," he said, handing it to Don. "Sit down here and eat it while I talk to you."

Don sat down in the arm chair and gratefully ate the sandwich. The colonel seated himself on the arm of the chair.

"Of course all you boys wondered what had become of me," he began. "I'll tell you the whole story. Some years ago I was in business with Major Tireson and a man named Morton Dennings. I never cared for Dennings, who was a close friend of the major's, but we got along fairly well and things went smoothly. We all bought shares in some mines in the west in those early days, but they turned out to be worthless and I filed my papers away. I didn't think anything more about them until this summer, when Major Tireson called on me and asked me to sell him my share in the mine.

"As I had thought the mine absolutely worthless I naturally wanted to know why he was so anxious to buy, and he told me that he and his partner wanted to hold the land for future speculation. I knew that there was some flaw in the story somewhere and refused to sell to him, although he did get pretty warm about it. I determined to have the place looked up and reported upon, but I let the summer slip by without attending to it, and so I lost a valuable opportunity.

"I had wired Tireson the date of my arrival here and he put his plans together well, the scoundrel!

I was just about to board a train at my home town when a messenger boy ran up to me and gave me a brief note. It was from Tireson, asking me to stop off at Spotville Point and see this man Dennings, who lives there. So I dropped off the train at that town and went up to the home of Morton Dennings. He entertained me all evening, and just before I was ready to go to bed late in the night I heard an automobile drive alongside of the house. Dennings and two men promptly seized me and told me that I would be kept a prisoner until I turned over my share in the mine to Tireson and himself. I told him that I would be a prisoner forever before I would do that. They took me out of the house and to my surprise brought me here, where I found these quarters fitted up for me."

"And you have been here, right under our noses, while detectives have hunted for you all over the country!" said Don.

"Oh, yes, that was the point of their idea. No one would think of looking for me right at my own school. Tireson has been here time after time, trying to make me reveal the hiding place of my papers, but he hasn't arrived any place yet. He isn't going to, either. But they are both getting tired of the

game, and I'm afraid they are planning some new move with me."

"But what can they do?" inquired Don, anxiously. "They can't turn you loose and they can't keep you a prisoner forever."

"No," said the colonel, getting up and pacing the floor. "But there is always violence and the possibility of dragging me off on some ship and dropping me in some Far Eastern port!"

"They won't dare resort to violence!" flashed Don.

The colonel shrugged his shoulders. "We don't know what they will do. Remember, they are pretty deeply into this thing right now. To allow me to get loose and tell a few things would ruin them both. They can't afford to mince matters."

"I must get out of here somehow and get help," cried Don.

"We'll see about that," returned the colonel, returning to his seat on the arm of the chair. He dropped one arm around Don's shoulder. "Let me hear how you came to be mixed up in this business, Mercer."

Don related everything from the beginning and the colonel was an interested listener. He was able to

explain something that had puzzled the boys.

"Dennings didn't come here himself, as a regular thing," he said. "He made the old farmhouse his headquarters and waited there for news. I guess one of the men used a looking glass to flash his 'No progress.' There never was any progress. Major Tireson has pleaded and coaxed and threatened, and he finally did admit that the mine had turned out to be one of the best of its kind and that he and his partner were determined to get my share of it. That time we had the fire was when the cook, the old man, left a lid off of the stove and a curtain brushed over it. I thought something might come of that, but they had someone watching me all the time and I couldn't make any signals."

"Was there no way of signalling out of that window?" asked Don, nodding to one of the two in the room.

"They are all too high," answered the colonel. "I would have tried if—Listen!"

Footsteps were heard on the floor below and then a shrill whistle rang out. Someone shouted something. The colonel jumped up.

"They have discovered that you are gone!" he cried. "I must hide you at once, and I have just

the place. I'm sure these fellows don't know of it, and I'll risk it. Come here."

He led the way to the other side of the room to where a dusty lamp hung. Brushing this to one side he disclosed the opening of a ventilator with a black iron frame. He thrust his fingers into the openings in the frame and pulled the iron work out.

"Here," gasped the colonel. "Get into that hole. It doesnt go very far, but it will hold you all right. Don't make a sound."

The opening was large enough for Don to get his body into, an awkward task, as he went in backward. The passage of what had once been an air-shaft extended back for a distance of about seven feet, and he lay flat on his stomach, finding plenty of room in the shaft. The colonel replaced the grating, dropped the map into place and hurried back to the center of the room, where he picked up his paper and sat down, pretending to read.

The noise downstairs continued and in a few minutes someone could be heard running up the stairs. A shout was raised outside the colonel's door.

"The boy is in with the colonel!" Dan's voice sounded.

Others ran up the stairs and the old man, Dan and Major Tireson rushed into the room. The colonel jumped to his feet, the picture of alarm as he faced his captors.

"What's the matter?" he cried. "Are you going to hurt me, Tireson?"

"I'm not going to touch you," shouted the major, in disgust. "We want that boy. Where is he?"

"What boy?" asked the colonel, blankly.

"You know very well what boy!" snorted the major. "We found the lock on your door open when we came in, and we know he is in here!"

"Oh, I see!" cried the colonel, as though a light had suddenly appeared to him.

"What do you see?" snapped Tireson, halted by the colonel's tone.

"Somebody was working at my lock up until the time you started to run around and yell downstairs," related the colonel. "I thought it was one of you trying to get the padlock unlocked so I didnt pay any attention. Who was this boy you are talking about? What is he doing here? Why——"

"Never mind all that," Major Tireson cut him short. "Dan, go out in the hall and see if you can

find that boy. Lively now. He must not get out of the place!"

The major then made a thorough inspection of the room, even going so far as to hastily brush aside the map, but did not find Don and he began to believe seriously that the boy had not entered the colonel's room. The old man had hurried out of the room and the major was now alone with Colonel Morrell.

"Look here, Elmer," said the major, sharply. "I'm going to give you one last chance to speak up and tell us where that bundle of papers of yours is. You have until tomorrow night. If you haven't spoken by then you will have to suffer the consequences. Dennings is more than tired of your stubbornness, and we won't stand for any more of it. You will be moved tomorrow night, so you had better come across with the papers before then, or you will probably go for a long sea voyage."

"Going to kidnap me and take me for a sail, eh?" inquired the colonel.

"As far as kidnapping is concerned I think that has happened already. I can't help it about the sea voyage. You must realize that we can't let you

loose and if you won't talk you can take what is coming to you."

"You'll suffer for this, you scoundrel!" roared the colonel.

"Maybe," the major shrugged. "We will if you ever get loose, and we are going to see that you don't. There is only one sensible thing to do, Morrell, and you know what that is."

"You'll never get those papers," affirmed the headmaster, firmly.

"Then you may take what is coming to you, you stubborn old idiot!" shouted the major, leaving the room. He closed the door after him and turned a key in the lock. His footsteps were heard going down the stairs a few minutes later.

When the colonel thought that it was safe he let Don out of the ventilator and brushed him off. The cadet's uniform was covered with dust from the shaft.

"Too bad that shaft was ever boarded up," remarked Don.

"Yes, but it was boarded up. Well, you heard what our friend the major said. I am to be carted off tomorrow night and bundled to sea."

"I heard it all right," said Don. "We must find

out some way to prevent it. But if we can't do that I might lay in the ventilator, find out where they are taking you, and hurry out of here as soon as they are gone. I can probably get help before you have been carried very far."

"That is true," agreed the colonel. "That may be the best thing to do. I presume we had better be ready to hide you at a moment's notice. You can share my food with me today and at night we'll sleep together. The bed is wide enough for both of us. We'll play the game of hide and seek tomorrow and when they come to take me away at night you can carry out your plan."

Twice again through the day Don was forced to take to the ventilator and hide, once when food was brought to the colonel and once when the major paid a visit to the room. It was evident that Tireson was worried, and the colonel asked if the boy had been found. The major refused to answer but it was evident from his manner that he had not been. Finding all in order in the room the major retired, and late in the afternoon the padlock was repaired and snapped in place.

Don and the colonel spent a contented day, during which they became well acquainted. Don told

his superior of the events of the past three months and the colonel talked to him of a variety of subjects. When night came on the colonel lighted a lamp he had and they talked again.

"No one will be here again," observed the colonel. "We'll turn in soon and get some sleep. I'm a very light sleeper and if anyone comes to the door I'll hustle you into the ventilator. Lucky thing they gave us a lot of food."

The colonel explained that the men generally gave him enough food for three meals and left him alone until the following day. Then the colonel brought out a checker board and some checkers and he and Don had some good games. The colonel won them all and was in high spirits

"Well, I guess we had better turn in," the headmaster decided, after he had won the fourth game. He swept the checkers toward him.

Then both of them started and turned. The padlock opened with a snap, and before they could move the door was flung open.

CHAPTER XIX

VENCH IS MYSTERIOUS

THE three boys had scoured the entire lake front without obtaining any clues as to the whereabouts of the missing cadet. On the way back a sudden thought occurred to Terry.

"Look here," said the red-headed boy. "Don was seen to be going in the direction of the boathouse. Perhaps he took out a boat. Hadn't we better go back there and find out?"

"That's a good idea," Rhodes agreed. "I don't see what object he could have had in taking a boat ride, but we had better look into that phase of it."

When they arrived at the boathouse they found the keeper of the boats there. Jim asked him if Don had come to him the day before to request the use of a boat.

"No, he didn't," answered Ryan, the keeper. "I wasn't around the boathouse until late in the after-

noon. But one of the boats is gone. The one that was in that rack."

He pointed to the empty rack and went on: "When I got down here yesterday I noticed that boat was gone and I looked around the lake for it. It wasn't until this morning that I heard Mr. Mercer was missing, and even then I didn't think that he might have crossed the lake in my boat."

"I suppose it is useless to think of crossing the lake and making a search in the dark?" Jim advanced.

Rhodes looked out of the boathouse window. "I'm very much afraid that it would be out of the question," he answered, gravely. "It is growing quite dark and it has begun to snow again. But in the morning we'll ask for permission off to cross the lake and search the woods and that old farmhouse over there."

"That's so!" exclaimed Terry. "I never thought of that old place. Perhaps it has something to do with the whole thing."

"It is possible," agreed Jim. "What if Major Tireson will not give us permission to skip classes in the morning?"

"If he doesn't," said Rhodes, grimly. "We'll just

wire your father to come down here and take charge of things. Then I think he won't refuse your request."

Jim chafed against the falling darkness and the snow which had begun to fall. The snow of itself would not hold up his search, but the darkness delayed everything in a way that was maddening. There was nothing left to do, however, but to wait until another day.

At supper time Cadet Vench signalled him to wait for him after the meal, and when it was all over the little cadet walked to his room with him. Rhodes was in the room talking with Terry as they went in.

"What did you want to see me about?" asked Jim.

"I wanted to see all of you," Vench replied. "Look here, Rhodes, can you sleep in Don's bed tonight?"

"Here, in this room?" asked Rhodes, astonished.

"Yes. I want you three to sleep together tonight and to be right where I can get ahold of you. You don't need to ask permission to do it. Just wait until the Officer of the Day passes by on his rounds and then come in here, with your clothes. You can get out early in the morning. I want you all to-

gether, because I may have some work for you all before morning."

"What is up, Vench?" inquired Terry.

"Well, I'm not even certain enough to tell you what I have in mind," confessed the little cadet. "I think I have run across a valuable tip and I'm going to look it up alone. Not because I want to be selfish or anything like that, but it is going to entail some cold and some dangerous work, and as it may be a wild goose chase I want to saddle no one but myself with it. You'll sleep here tonight, won't you, Rhodes?"

"Why, yes, I'll do it," nodded the cadet captain. "I suppose you must have some very good reason for asking it and I'll try to help out."

"Thanks," said Vench.

"Has all this business got anything to do with Don?" asked Jim, eagerly.

"I think that it has, but I'm not dead sure. As I told you, I received a valuable tip and I want to work on it. Now, we must arrange some kind of a signal. I may be out most of the night, and I want to signal you fellows to join me outside. If I do I don't want to have to come back inside the building to get you."

"You may be outside most of the night!" cried Rhodes. "You'll freeze, Vench."

"I may be too active to freeze," grinned the cadet. "Have anyone of you fellows got a long cord?"

"I have a ball of string in my trunk," Terry offered.

"Fine. Let's have it."

Terry procured the ball of string and handed it to Vench The little cadet looked from one to the other.

"Which of you is the lightest sleeper?" he asked.

"I'm a fairly light sleeper," said Rhodes.

"All right." Vench tied the string to the end of Don's bed and then hid the ball under the mattress. "Now, as soon as the Officer of the Day has made his inspection you drop that ball of cord out of the window and let it hang there. If I want you fellows during the night I'll yank that cord and wake you up by shaking the bed. If I don't pull it at all during the night pull it up again in the morning. Is that understood?"

"Yes," the boys nodded, completely mystified.

"All right. Now, if I do pull the cord, you three fellows dress and slip out of the side door and join me there. Is all that clear?"

"Almost," laughed Terry. "Be a sport, Vench, and tell us what is up?"

"Nothing doing," Vench returned, firmly. "This may all be a false alarm, and if it is I don't intend that anyone but myself shall pay the penalty for it."

"But if it has anything to do with Don we ought to have some hand in it," urged Jim.

"If it turns out as I expect and Don is concerned in it, you will have a hand, maybe both hands in it," countered Vench. "Now, I must get back to my room. Don't forget to drop that string out of the window, and whatever you do, don't keep on sleeping if I pull it. Goodnight, fellows."

"Goodnight," they returned, and Rhodes added: "And good luck to you in whatever it is you are doing."

Vench went out of the room, chuckling at Rhodes' parting shot. Terry looked at his companions.

"Mr. Vench is becoming very mysterious!" he said.

"He certainly doesn't mean to bother anyone else with his ideas," commented Rhodes.

Mr. Vench returned to his own room and picked up a book After a few moments he put it down

and turned to his roomate, who was studying at the same table

"I want you to help me out," he said. "After the Officer of the Day comes around I'm going out of the building on some very special business, something which may keep me out all night. I'll tell you what it is when it is all over. What I want you to do is simply not to worry your head if I seem to be a bit unusual in my movements tonight."

"All right," agreed his roommate, in some astonishment.

Before long the warning bell sounded and Vench and his roommate undressed and got into bed. The Officer of the Day visited the room and made his inspection. Then the lights went out and the dormitory became still. In another fifteen minutes the footsteps of the Officer of the Day sounded on his return trip. And when Vench was sure that the temporary officer had gone to bed he got up quietly and dressed.

His roommate heard him but made no comment, and Vench finished his dressing and put on his overcoat. Very carefully he opened the door and looked out into the hall. It was totally deserted and the little cadet left his room and walked quietly down

the corridor, down the stairs, and soundlessly let himself out into the cold night. He had no hat on, but Vench was used to going without one and did not mind this fact in the least.

He stood for an instant in the gloom of the building and looked out over the campus. Clinton Hall was the last of the dormitories and he was in no danger of being seen from Locke, where the major had his rooms. The night was cloudy and quite dark, with occasional flurries of snow. The air was slightly damp and very cold. Vench thrust his hands into his pockets and looked from right to left.

A short distance before him, directly across the campus, was a fringe of trees and snow covered bushes behind which lay Clanhammer Hall. It was to this thicket that Vench now directed his attention, and he made his way toward it, keeping as much as possible in the shadows. It was a lucky thing, he reflected, that it was not a moonlight night, for that would have rendered his task a very hard one with considerable danger, as he was compelled to cross open ground to gain the woods just before the old hall. To be seen by anyone as he flitted across the snowy campus would have seriously

hindered his object, and he was more than thankful for the obscurity of the stormy night.

He gained the fringe of trees and undergrowth and concealed himself in it. Right in front of him, and at a distance of forty yards, was the main door of Clanhammer Hall. The old building rose straight up in front of him, dark and grim and silent, wrapped in a shroud of mystery and obscurity. There was no light in the place and the dirty windows stared at him like dead eyes.

Vench looked at his watch and saw that it was barely a quarter after ten. "I've got three-quarters of an hour yet," he murmured, replacing the timepiece. "Hope it shows up on time."

Fifteen minutes dragged by and Vench grew cold. He moved his arms back and forth to keep up the circulation of his blood, being careful to keep from making any noise while doing so. There was plenty of space in the thicket in which to walk up and down and he began to do so, wearing a path in the snow. This helped him to keep warm and made the time pass a little more quickly. When he looked at his watch it was a quarter of eleven.

And at that moment there was a step on the snow close by. Quick as lightning Vench crouched

down behind the nearest bush and looked out. The major was coming up the driveway toward the old school, muffled in his overcoat, his head sunk forward in his collar. It was evident that he had no fear of detection, for he glanced neither to the right nor to the left, but walked confidently up to the door, inserted a key in the lock and opened the barrier. He went in and closed it back of him.

There was no light in the place and no light showed after the major closed the door. It was evident that the major was very familiar with the place, and after watching for at least ten minutes Vench straightened out and once more began his pacing. But a few minutes later he stopped and listened eagerly.

The soft chug of a motor car was approaching, and in a short time it drew nearer until it was in sight. It had approached by way of the east gate and stood just outside the hall and across from Vench. It was a long black car, inclosed except for the driver's seat, which was exposed to the wind on both sides. Curtains had been pulled down on the inside.

A driver sat at the wheel, a short fat man who looked to be quite old, although there was not much

to be seen of him, for he was bundled up in a huge fur coat that made him shapeless, and a fur cap was on his head. As soon as the car had come to a halt he leaned over the wheel and appeared to go to sleep. The door of the car was opened from within and two men got out. Both of them were plainly dressed and looked to be ordinary business men. They closed the door of the car, and just before the door shut Vench could see that there was no one else in it.

One of the men approached the driver and shook him. "Wake up, Garry," he said, impatiently. "We're going inside. As soon as we come down with another party you be ready to go. Get me?"

"All right," growled the driver, and slumped over the wheel again.

The two men made their way up the steps and entered the building. The major had evidently expected them and had left the door open. When they had gone inside there was no sound, and the man on the wheel did not move.

Vench considered, his pulses pounding rapidly as a sudden thought struck him. Things were working out as he had planned, but he was now considering something which had not occurred to him before. He had not much time in which to decide, so he

made up his mind rapidly. His mind made up swiftly, he shed his overcoat, dropped it in the bushes, and rubbed his hands together.

Then, his eyes concentrated on the figure over the wheel, Cadet Vench moved swiftly. From the back of the car he approached, his footsteps noiseless in the light snow, he drew nearer to the unheeding driver. Then, with a single bound Cadet Vench leaped to the running board and threw himself upon the man at the wheel.

The man was taken completely by surprise and for a second he offered no resistance. In that precious second Vench slipped one hand over his mouth and kept it there. That left him just one hand to fight with, but it was vital that he keep the man from crying out, so he kept his hand glued to the mouth of the driver. For a brief second the man was motionless with surprise and fear, and then he began to struggle furiously.

Vench gripped his throat determinedly, realizing that the struggle must not take much time. He drew the man toward him as he saw that he intended to blow the horn and bring the men in Clanhammer Hall to the spot. The driver fell from the seat and they both rolled to the ground, Vench's hand

still clenched over his mouth. With the other he still choked the man.

The struggle did not take long in actual time but it seemed to Vench that it did. The man was old and stout, not in any kind of physical condition, and he was handicapped by the heavy coat which he wore. Vench felt his struggles grow weaker and weaker, and at last they stopped altogether. When the cadet felt that it was safe he released his hold on the man's throat but not on his mouth. The man lay still and Vench was satisfield that he was unconscious.

Then Vench released his hold on his mouth and looked around him. The snow was badly kicked up where they had struggled, but there were no other signs. He stripped the big fur coat and the cap from the man's person and then pulled off his belt. With this he secured the driver's hands behind his back and then considered.

"I can't leave him here to freeze in the bushes," Vench reflected. "But where will I put him?" Then it flashed over him that there was a tool house not far away, the door of which was always unlocked, and he determined to take the man there. But when he tried to lift him he found it a task beyond his strength.

"Nothing left but to drag him," decided the cadet, and he took the man by the feet and started. Finding this inconvenient he placed his hands beneath the man's shoulders and dragged him through the thicket and over the campus to the tool house. The door was open and he tumbled the man in.

The driver had regained consciousness but contented himself with groaning. Knowing that if his hands were left tied they might become frost bitten Vench took off the belt and went out, dropping a wooden bar across the holders as he did so. He knew that the man might work his way out, but that it would take him several hours to do so.

Then Vench sped back to the car before Clanhammer Hall. No one had come out yet and his way was clear. He put on the fur coat and the cap, slumped down in them and hung over the wheel, waiting for the next move in the game that he had decided to play.

CHAPTER XX

THE MAJOR MAKES A MOVE

When Don and the colonel swung around in consternation at the sound of the door opening they faced Major Tireson and the old man. There was a look of triumph on the face of the major, and the old man, standing just back of him with a candle in his hand had a slight smile on his otherwise expressionless face.

"So!" cried the major, as they jumped to their feet. "You two are together, it seems."

The colonel recovered his presence of mind instantly. "Why, yes, we do seem to be together," he remarked.

"And that boy was with you all day, eh?" questioned the major. "Where did you hide him?"

"I don't remember, major," said the colonel. "That happened this morning, and I can't remember that far back."

The major's face darkened. "Trying to be funny, aren't you, Elmer? It won't do you any good. We

knew that this boy did not get out of the building, and my keeper suspected that you had him with you. He crept up here and heard you talking, and then he told me just now that you were together. But you won't be for long!"

"No, I suppose not," the colonel retorted, bitterly.

The major strode up to Don. "I've had a lot of trouble with you, young man," he snarled. "But I'm not going to have any more. Just as soon as we get through with the colonel we'll take care of you."

"Just as you please," returned Don. "But I warn you that it will go hard with you if I once get away."

"You won't get away," assured the major. He turned to the colonel. "You are going away, colonel."

"Humph," snorted the colonel. "I thought it was to be tomorrow night."

"You are going tonight," the major said. "We've had enough out of you, and we don't propose to take any more. If you feel like telling us where those papers are on the way, all well and good, but if you don't you'll start on a long trip."

"I prefer travelling to talking," the colonel retorted, briefly.

At that moment there came the sound of steps on the stairs and as the major and the old man did not turn with any degree of surprise the colonel and

Don knew that enemies and not friends were approaching. This proved to be the case when two men entered the room and nodded to the major.

"Is the car here?" asked the major.

"Yes," said one man. "It is waiting at the door. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, he is ready," nodded the major, pointing toward Morrell. "Take him down, and if he makes any noise just put him to sleep. We can't afford to have anything happen now."

"What about the boy?" asked the second man.

"We'll leave him here for the time being. I haven't decided yet what disposition will be made of him, but I'll figure that out later. In the meantime, take the colonel to the place of which I told you, and when I give you further orders he is to be taken out of the country."

"All right, chief," answered the first man, and he took the colonel by one arm. His companion ranged himself on the other side and took the colonel's other arm.

"Goodbye, Mercer," said the colonel. "We'll get the best of these scoundrels yet."

"I'm sure of it, colonel," returned Don. "Take good care of yourself, sir."

"You two have become very friendly in a short time, haven't you?" sneered the major.

"Well, that's bound to happen, major," said Morrell, slowly. "When two men get together they feel some sort of natural ties. Some day, if you ever become a man, you'll know what I mean!"

The major raised his fist in a threatening attitude and Don sprang forward to the colonel's defense. But the man who held the colonel's right arm interposed.

"Here, cut that out! If you want to get this man away tonight, you had better start. Do your fighting later."

Grumbling to himself the major left the room, followed by the colonel and his guards. Last of all went the old man, casting over his shoulder at Don a triumphant grin. Then he locked the door and Don was left alone, standing in the center of the floor in the circle of the lamp light.

"They certainly put one over on us that time," he muttered. "I never heard them come up the stairs. Must have crept up very softly.Now I wonder what the major will try and do with me?"

In the meantime the colonel was escorted down the stairs to the front door, where the big car stood in the drive, with the driver apparently asleep over

the wheel. The door of the car was opened and the colonel was thrust inside, the men watching him closely to see that he did not raise any outcry. When he had been safely installed the major walked around to speak to the driver.

The man at the wheel had awakened and was now sitting and staring straight ahead, more than ever sunk in the fur of his coat and hat, his face in the shadows. He did not bother to turn when the major approached him.

"Drive with your lights off when you go out of here, Garry," he said. "When they get the colonel at Denning's place, you put your car up and go home. Do you understand?"

"Right!" growled the driver, his face in the fur.

The major walked back to the car door and spoke to the men inside. The driver looked right and left and then straight ahead. The door was slammed and the major stepped away from the car.

"Go ahead," he commanded, in a low voice.

Vench reached down, released the brake and started the engine. He backed the car around in the driveway and sent it out of the school yard in low speed, keeping his lights low. It was not until he had rolled out onto the main highway that he switched them on again and picked up speed.

Inwardly, he thanked his lucky stars even while he wondered. He was glad that he had run with the hares on that day, and that he had run with his partner through Spotville Point. The other boys had told him of Dennings and his home at Spotville Point, and Vench knew that this place was to be his destination. He did not know where the house itself was but he did know where the town was. The location of the house would come later.

But what puzzled the cadet was the man who had come out of Clanhammer Hall. Vench had fully expected to see Don brought out, and the sight of the portly colonel astonished him. Fitting loose ends together he quickly arrived at the correct solution of the problem, although he had no means of knowing how the colonel had come to be in Clanhammer Hall or why he was being taken away. But the big fact was that it was the colonel who was in the car back of him, and that he was getting a chance to save the man whose diappearance had puzzled detectives and those most interested.

The drive to Spotville Point took longer than Vench had thought, for he was only vaguely familiar with the roads and was following a general sense of direction more than anything else. He was worried for fear that some happening might come up

which would spoil his game, in which case he planned to make a sudden and savage attack on the two men, counting on the colonel to come to his aid. But at the end of an hour he had arrived safely at Spotville Point, and now his only difficulty lay in not giving away the fact that he did not know where Denning's house was. He was turning over in his mind the advisability of pretending that his engine was breaking down and stopping somewhere when one of the men pulled down a sliding glass window back of him and spoke into his ear.

"Take the back road, Garry," he said. "We don't want to go up the main street. Slow down, or you'll miss it."

Vench obediently slowed down, and the man ducked back, closing the slide. To his right was a lane, and Vench turned the car into it, at the same time chuckling.

"You'll never know how much I thank you for that one, mister!" he thought.

The car lurched for a short distance down this lane and then two houses loomed up out of the blackness. Vench was not sure which one was Denning's, but noting that one was not in as good a state of repair as the other one he took a desperate chance and drove into the yard. It was evidently all right,

for nothing was said, and he brought the car to a stop before the front steps.

The men immediately jumped out and helped the colonel after them. Without paying any attention to Vench they took the colonel between them up on the porch and one man produced a key from his pocket and unlocked the front door. All three of them walked in, the door was closed and Vench was left alone.

Without showing undue haste he turned the car around and rolled out of the yard. When once he gained the highway he turned on speed and fairly tore back for the school. He was amazed at his luck. No one had looked closely at him and his deception was unknown and unsuspected. His colonel was in a place where he could be reached easily, and although his investigations had not brought Don back he had at least fallen on a trail rich in promise. Vench drove the big car rapidly back to the school and jumped from it at the east gate.

He made his way around Clinton Hall and into the shadows of Locke. He was reasonably sure that Major Tireson was in bed by this time, but he wished to take no chances and so he proceeded with the utmost caution. When he got under the window of the room occupied by the three boys his groping

fingers encountered the hanging cord and he pulled it sharply and continuously, so as to shake vigorously the bed in which Rhodes was sleeping. After a few moments there was an answering pull on the cord, and he made his way around to the side door and waited.

It seemed an age before the door back of him was pulled open and Rhodes, Terry and Jim appeared, wrapped in their uniform overcoats. He motioned to them to be quiet and led them to the big car, which he had halted beyond Clanhammer Hall. They all crowded into the broad front seat, and before driving out of the yard Vench threw off the fur coat, which was cumbersome, and donned his cold overcoat, which he found lying in the bushes where he had left it.

Then Vench drove the car out of the drive and once more headed for Spotville Point. The cadets, who had kept silent up until now, could contain their curiosity no longer.

"For the love of Mike, Vench, what is up?" inquired Rhodes.

"Have you found Don?" asked Jim.

"I'm sorry to say that I haven't," returned the cadet at the wheel. "But unless I am greatly mistaken I have found Colonel Morrell!"

"What!" cried the cadets.

"Yes," nodded Vench. He told them the story of the events of the night and then went on: "This is what gave me the idea. While I was walking around this afternoon looking for clues along the lake front I ran across my friend Paul Morro, the man who cut me dead down at the ice cream parlor. Among other things he told me that Major Tireson went to Clanhammer Hall every night and entered with his own key. As soon as I heard that I made up my mind to find out once and for all and right away why he should care to go into that old building so often. I returned to the school and immediately ran into astonishing luck.

"No one was in the central hall of Locke when I entered, and I was walking along on my way to hunt up you fellows, when I passed the office. I had on rubbers and consequently made no noise, and it was owing to this fact that I stumbled across unexpected information. The major was at his desk, telephoning, and he was directing that a closed car be sent to the door of Clanhammer Hall that very night. That was all I heard, but it was enough to make me go out there and look in on the mysterious doings. I expected that he was going to move Don, but not being sure I didn't want to ask you fellows

to spend several cold hours out there for what might prove to be a goose chase. I am disappointed that it didn't turn out to be Don, but we can rescue the colonel, unless some unexpected hitch turns up."

"By George, you've done a good piece of work, Vench," complimented Rhodes, warmly.

"I think I can see the whole thing," struck in Terry.

"What do you mean?" asked Jim.

"Why, it is perfectly plain. The major has somehow or other removed Don, who may have stumbled onto something just as Vench did. If we can bring the colonel back he will have Tireson arrested and we ought to have plain sailing."

"We're going to get our colonel back, all right," affirmed Rhodes, his tone grim.

In a short time they reached Spotville Point and Vench once more ran the big car down the back lane. At a point some hundred yards from the dark house he brought the car to a stop and got out, followed by the others.

"Let's go, fellows," urged Vench, slipping off his overcoat. "And quiet is the word!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE SURPRISE ATTACK

UNDER cover of the thick darkness the cadets crept forward and approached the back of the house. There was no light to be seen, and Vench was worried for fear that they had suddenly decided to move the captive. But when they had ranged themselves along side the building they found a faint light escaping from the bottom of black shades. It was so faint as to be undetected unless one was at the window.

"They're still here, whispered Vench. "What shall we do, rush them?"

"It looks as though we will have to," returned the senior captain, guardedly. "We don't know how many are in there, but we will have to take a chance on it."

"There is no use in breaking in these windows," said Jim. "Before we could climb in they would have the light out and disappear. Can we get in from the front porch?"

Vench nodded and they made their way quietly around to the front, stepping with painful care. Once on the porch they cautiously looked in from the vantage point and saw that the light was in an inner room.

"We'll have to smash the window totally out with one smash," decided Terry. "We can't waste time by pulling out broken glass, and we don't want to cut ourselves. Suppose two of us kick this glass through on a given signal, and two kick out the second window? We'll jam through and go for 'em!"

"Suppose the light goes out?" asked Jim.

"We mustn't allow it to go out," returned Rhodes "Let's get ready to board ship."

Rhodes and Vench took up their place near one window and Terry and Jim took up a position at the other. By a mutual whisper the four boys raised their feet, heels poised near the glass. There was no movement.

"Go!" whispered Rhodes.

Four heels struck the panes of glass with a shattering crash and a tinkling sound echoed through the house. Carried forward by the momentum Jim and Vench hurtled right on through, Jim experienced the cutting of his trouser leg. Vench was luckier and landed in the room without mishap, and

sprinted madly for the door from which the light had come, with Jim a foot behind him.

Rhodes and Terry flung themselves after the first two, with no personal danger, for the bulk of the glass had been carried clear out by the accuracy of the kicks. By the time the two last ones reached the lighted room they found their two comrades busily engaged.

Vench had entered first, his eyes sweeping the room. The colonel sat in a chair, tightly bound, and near him were the two men. One of them had been stretched on the sofa in the room and the other was standing before a small stove. At the startling sound which jarred their ears they had been paralyzed with astonishment, and before any decided movement could be made Vench was at the door and Jim was just behind him. The man on the sofa leaped to his feet and reached for a heavy cane nearby, but the man near the stove leaped for the electric light button.

Vench saw him and jumped. Just as the man's hand was closing over the button which might have completely ruined their plans the little cadet bore down on him like a wildcat. His hands closed over the man's shoulders and he spun him around. Before he could recover his balance Cadet Vench hit him a

well timed blow on the point of the jaw. The man went down and Vench promptly threw himself upon him with enthusiasm.

Jim jumped for the second man, who, club upraised, bore down on Vench. Seeing Jim close to him the man whirled and struck at him with all his strength. Had the blow landed fully it would have ended Jim's effectiveness that night. But Jim pulled his head to one side just in time to cause the blow to land on his shoulder near the neck. The blow caused him intense agony, and he faltered.

Rhodes tore into the room and at sight of him the colonel uttered a cry of delight. Terry followed and they bore down on the man with the cane. The colonel had been bewildered at the sight of the boys, for Vench, Jim and Terry were unknown to him, and only Rhodes was familiar. Seeing that his day had dawned the colonel became impatient and tugged at his bonds, eager to strike a blow in the fight for his liberty. But he was unable to pull himself loose and had to content himself with watching.

The man with the cane had thought Jim and Vench alone, but when he saw the other two cadets drawing near his tactics abruptly changed. Quick as a flash he dropped his weapon and reached into his back pocket. It was then that Jim had his opportunity.

Although his shoulder pained him greatly he visioned the man's thought and threw himself forward, gripping the arm in the pocket. Then, while Terry and Rhodes knocked the man down, Jim twisted a revolver from his grasp.

Cadet Vench was having a warm time of it. The man beneath him was powerfully built, and with a single heave he sent the little cadet floundering to one side. From that position the man succeeded in twisting one leg around Vench's body, cutting off his breath as he pressed his body to the wall. Vench's eyes bulged and the perspiration stood out on his head, but he was far too plucky to call out. Now safely astride the small cadet the man raised his fist to deal him a savage blow.

Jim saved Vench from a blow that would have put an end to his activities. Seeing that Rhodes and Terry had the other man quiet he turned to see how Vench was making out. The peril that his friend was in struck him at once, and he shot forward in a forceful dive. Fairly and squarely he struck the man, bowling him over like a log, and when Jim raised himself the man lay still, his head against the base of the wall.

Vench rolled over, panting. "Get something and tie these fellows up," he directed.

While Rhodes kneeled on the chest of the man whom they had overcome Terry ruthlessly tore some red tassels from the window curtains and proceeded to bind the hands of each man behind him. Little or nothing had been said, and except for a few grunts and an oath from one of the men, the struggle had taken place in a silence that proclaimed the grimness and purpose of it. Now that the men were securely tied Rhodes ran to his colonel and began to untie knots.

"Well, we're here, Colonel Morrell," he sang out, cheerfully. "I hope you'll pardon our unceremonious way of coming in, but nobody answered my knock!"

"Pardon it!" roared the colonel, beaming with excitement and delight. "I—I'll—I don't know what I will do! That was the bulliest, cracker-jackest, A number One fight I ever saw in my life! I'm mighty proud of you boys!"

The ropes released the colonel sprang up and threw himself on Rhodes in an outburst of admiration and thankfulness, pounding him familiarly on the back and very nearly shaking his hand off. With a single glance at the bound men to see that they were safe Rhodes introduced the others and lavishly praised the ingenuity and courage of Cadet Vench. The colonel

was tremendously pleased with his new fourth class men.

"By George, I must have the best fourth class in the history of the school, if I may judge by you three boys and Don Mercer," he exclaimed. He turned to Jim and told him about Don, adding. "So you see, there is nothing to worry about. As soon as we have locked these two scoundrels up and have captured Tireson we'll liberate Don. If that happens sometime tomorrow we'll have to keep a watchful eye on Clanhammer Hall and see that they don't move him."

"Shall we get these men out of here, colonel?" asked Rhodes. "There is no knowing who may come along and we wouldn't want our game spoiled now."

"No, that is so," the colonel agreed. "Though the enemy would have to bring an army along to overcome you boys! We'll get these men to the nearest lock-up and then have someone posted here to take Dennings if he comes, which I suppose he will."

After making sure that the fire would go out and not set the place on fire the boys once more examined the bonds of the prisoners and then pushed them out of the house and into the back of the car, where the colonel, now aroused and willing to fight, sat guard

with Rhodes and Terry. Jim, who had turned the revolver to the colonel, rode in the front seat with Vench. At the colonel's suggestion they drove five miles to Arrington, where, after some difficulty, the sheriff was aroused from his comfortable bed and came down to hear their story. He was interested and astonished, and when he had dressed he led them to the county jail, where the two men, still sullenly silent, were locked up safely. Then, after the officer of the law had agreed to send a special man to watch Dennings house, the boys drove the colonel to Portville.

In talking it over, just before they left Arrington, the colonel decided that he would return to Portville and remain in hiding, there to form a trap which would take in both the major and Dennings. The major was easy to reach, but Dennings was not. He had business in many places and had a habit of slipping from place to place, and the colonel was particularly anxious to catch him.

Vench drove to Portville and the colonel engaged a room at the main hotel. The boys followed him to his room and they had a final council of war.

"I want you boys to return and go on with things just the same as if nothing had happened," directed the colonel. "Of course, the major may find out

that the game has been spoiled, and then he'll try to escape. If possible, keep your eyes on him. Watch Clanhammer Hall, too. We mustn't allow anything to happen to Don."

"What shall I do with that driver in the tool house?" asked Vench. "If we leave him there all night he will freeze, because I took his fur coat off."

"I'll take care of him," promised the colonel. "The first thing in the morning I am going to report everything to the chief of police here, who is a personal friend of mine, and I'll have a man sent up to bring him to the jail, to be kept there until we have arrested the others. He'll be all right until morning. Now, you boys had better be getting back to school. Whatever you do, don't let the major catch you!"

Colonel Morrell then shook hands cordially with the boys, expressing once more his satisfaction and gratitude, and the boys left him. Vench left the car at a public garage, with orders not to allow anyone to touch it without his consent. Then the four boys walked back to school, keenly alive to the bite of the winter wind.

"No use talking," said Rhodes, enthusiastically. "Mr. Vench will be nothing less than a general!"

"I'll be lucky if I'm ever a good bell boy!" grinned

Vench. "Fate was good to me. I was looking for Don, and eventually I found him, through the colonel."

"I guess we'll always stand well with our headmaster!" chuckled Terry.

When they got back to the school the boys used the utmost caution and got back to their rooms in safety. The night was nearly gone, and when the bugle blow early next morning Messrs. Rhodes, Mercer, Mackson and Vench groaned aloud as they reluctantly left their beds.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MAN ON THE ICE

THAT day was cold and clear, with a still, penetrating cold that sent a tingle through the veins of the cadets. For hours the ice had been forming on Lake Blair, and this day bade fair to complete the work. One or two cadets had been hardy enough to test it and found that it was about ready to bear weight, and by nightfall it had frozen to a depth of several inches. It was the first real ice of the

season and the students hailed it with shouts of delight. Closets and trunks were hastily ransacked, and some of the new cadets went to town and bought skates. Others went to the cellars under the barn and brought out stored barrells, breaking them up and distributing the wood at various points along the lake for their fires.

In the afternoon Rhodes went to the major and asked for permission to go to town. He found the headmaster in a suspicious and angry mood, caused probably by the things which were weighing on his mind. When the senior cadet asked for leave the major swung around.

"What for?" he snapped.

Rhodes looked surprised. "I want to have my skates ground, for one thing," he returned. "And I have other small purchases."

"Very well, go ahead," grumbled the major. "There is too much of this running to town."

Rhodes saluted and left the office, not even taking the trouble to thank the major because of his ungracious tone, and returned to his room, where he got his skates and put on his overcoat. Then he hurried off to town.

"Wonder if Major Tireson really suspects anything or if he is just cranky today?" he wondered.

True to his statement Rhodes left his skates to be ground and purchased some necessities. Then, after making sure that no one was around who looked suspicious, he went to the main hotel in Portville and asked for the colonel's room. The clerk called the colonel on the telephone, allowed Rhodes to talk to him, and when the colonel was satisfied that it was his senior cadet captain, he told him to come up.

The colonel greeted Rhodes warmly and they discussed plans. Rhodes told him of the major's harshness, but the colonel was inclined to put it down to nervousness.

"He has a lot on his mind," said the colonel. "But even so, I guess it is about time to close in on this bunch. I'm afraid the major might slip through our fingers, so I've decided to trap him tomorrow morning. Just as soon as he gets teaching his classes the police chief and I will swoop down on the school and take him in. We'll just have to hope that somehow or other we'll run across Dennings. There are men out looking for him now, and they may run him down. I'm afraid to fool around too long, for fear that the major may move Don or decide to skip himself."

"If you are going to wait until tomorrow we will

have to see to it that Don is not spirited away tonight," said Rhodes.

"Yes, and a pretty close watch on the major will do that. Is anyone watching Clanhammer Hall now?"

"Terry is prowling around there," replied Rhodes.

"Very good. That driver of the car was taken out of the tool house early this morning and locked up, protesting that he had been kidnapped and abused by a big bully, that meaning Mr. Vench. I guess he was pretty cold, too. So you are having your skates ground, eh? The lake frozen over?"

"Yes, sir. All of the cadets are going skating tonight and we four planned to skate down near Clanhammer Hall, so as to keep on eye on the place."

"A good idea," nodded the colonel. "Is Jim keeping up an appearance of anxiety?"

"Yes, he is. He went to the major this morning and asked if any word had been received of his brother. The major assured him that all steps had been taken to find Don and told him to keep up his good spirits."

"Oh, sure!" grinned the colonel. "Fine old scoundrel that major is! Well, tomorrow morning, with as little fuss as possible, we'll just scoop up that arch plotter."

Agreeing to call the colonel directly if anything came up Rhodes left him then, and after getting his skates, went back to school. After a good supper the cadets studied for an hour and then rushed with whoops to the lake, where a half dozen big fires blazed into the dark sky along the edge of the sheet of ice. In a short time the runners of scores of skates were ringing with sharp, crisp sounds over the hard surface.

A dozen games were immediately started, games of snap the whip, hockey and races, but the four friends carefully avoided these and kept to themselves. Those who were not in the mood for playing, but who wanted to skate more calmly, moved toward the lower end of the lake, and the boys were in this company. Most of the fires were near the school, and only a few scattered ones extended down the lake.

"Let's take a long trip down to the end of the lake," suggested Vench, and they started off, side by side, their skates ringing on the frozen surface. They passed Clanhammer Hall, turning to watch it as they went by, but there was no light in it. They passed the last skaters and plunged on in the half gloom of the winter night toward the place where the lake narrowed down to a mere brook.

"Poor old Don must think we have deserted him," said Jim.

"I guess he does," cried Terry. "But we'll haul him out tomorrow morning as soon as the colonel returns."

"Tomorrow will be a big day," smiled Rhodes. "The older class men will be wild to have the colonel back, and it is a pretty safe bet that we won't do much in the way of routine when he does get back. The colonel is a royal old sport, and it is ten to one that he'll give us the whole day off, to skate and fool around, in celebration of his return."

They skated to the end of the lake and turned and started back. They were now in total darkness, with the fires in front of them as they began the return trip. Consequently, they could see far up the lake, to where several dark figures skated about, outlines against the distant fires. None of them was below Clanhammer Hall at the time.

"Somebody coming across the ice from the opposite side of the lake," called Jim.

Rhodes spun in a half circle and stopped, screening himself behind some bushes that grew near the shore, the others following his example. They watched the man who was crossing.

"He is walking," decided Terry, after they had watched him for a time.

"Yes, it isn't one of the cadets," said Vench. "He keeps looking up the lake and watching the boys. Wonder who it is?"

The man walked swiftly across the ice, his head bent over his shoulder to watch the boys who skated further up near the school. He was tall and wore a heavy overcoat and a cap. Rhodes eyed him keenly.

"Isn't he heading for Clanhammer Hall?" he asked.

"He certainly is!" cried Jim. "And do you know, I think it is that man Dennings!"

"There is no doubt of that," said Terry. "He is certainly going toward the hall, too. Maybe they are going to move Don right away. What shall we do?"

Rhodes stopped over and swiftly unbuckled the strap on his skates, kicking them off and stowing them in the bushes. "We'll follow him and see what he is up to. If a move is on foot to carry Don off we want to break it up in short order."

"You're right," agreed Jim. "Good thing we were at this end of the lake."

The others took off their skates, and following Rhodes' example, placed them in the nearby bushes.

When they looked again the man was leaving the ice and just entering the tangle of snow covered bushes that fringed the lake back of Clanhammer Hall.

"Well, let's go," ordered Rhodes. "We must keep that fellow in sight and somehow get in the hall. By hurrying along the shore we can soon make the place. On your toes, and don't make a sound!"

Leaping up the bank the four boys broke into a trot, heading for the old building which stood in darkness some quarter of a mile down the lake.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE END OF THE MYSTERY

When they finally came into full sight of the building Dennings was nowhere to be seen, and the boys came to a halt to consider. When they were reasonably sure that he was not lurking somewhere about they made their way to the school and found that he had gone around to the front door. Not wishing to try the door they walked around to the back, keeping in the dark shadow of the place. Vench went to the cellar window and pushed it open.

"Still able to get in here," he whispered. "I'll go first, because I know the way.

Vench lowered himself through the window and dropped with a dull thud into the musty cellar. Using extreme caution the other boys followed, Terry taking the precaution to close the window after him. For a moment they stood there, listening.

There was no sound from above, and Vench began to move away in the direction in which he remembered the stairs to be. Guided by the sound of his footsteps the cadets followed him, feeling their way gingerly. Vench struck his foot against the flight of wooden steps and began to ascend, and the others came after him.

At the top of the flight Cadet Vench stopped, feeling before him the door. He felt some anxiety that it might be locked, but it was not and he pushed it open. It swung back slowly and without sound, and they looked into the hall of the old school. It was pitch black there, but to their surprise they heard voices in a side room.

Following Vench they tiptoed along the hall, prepared to fight things out if they were discovered. Opposite the room from which the faint light was streaming and from which the voices came was another room, and the four boys had no difficulty in

slipping around a corner and into the room. And from this vantage point, safe in the darkness, they looked straight across the hall and into a large room.

Dennings was in the room, with his back to them, a revolver in his hand. He was pointing it at two very frightened men, who cowered in a far corner near some dusty old portraits which hung on the wall. Vench, examining the faces of the men, started in surprise. One of them was Paul Morro and the other was his companion.

The men had a single candle by which to work, and they had been engaged in cutting the canvas out of a picture when Dennings, had surprised them. Morro had a sharp knife in his hand. A long bench had been placed under the picture that they were cutting, and the men were standing in front of it. As they listened Dennings was speaking, his revolver still pointed at the men.

"That's a pretty queer story," the man was saying. "I wonder if I am supposed to believe it?"

"Sir," answered Paul Morro, "I am telling you the truth. My companion and I are French collectors, and we were tipped off that a valuable painting, stolen from France years ago, had been brought to this country and later had been given to this school as a present. We heard that the original canvas

had been concealed under the canvas of a common picture, and acting on the hint we came to America to rescue the portrait and return it to its rightful home. Sometime ago we entered Locke Hall and slashed a picture that we suspected there, but it did not prove to be the one that we wanted."

"I heard about that," nodded Dennings, half convinced. "How did you fellows come to get in here?"

"We made inquiries about the school in town," said Morro, "and we learned that this old building, which we had thought empty, had some furniture and paintings in it. A man who had repaired the roof a few years ago told us, and we decided that the portrait might be in here. So we forced a window and got into the place tonight. We were examining these pictures when you came in."

"So I noticed," said Dennings, grimly.

"That is all there is to it, sir. We did not intend to steal anything except the portrait, and that is ours anyway. We'll promise to leave and never come back if you will let us off."

"I don't know about that," said Dennings thoughtfully, lowering the revolver. "Look here, I can use you two. I have a prisoner up on the third floor, and I'm going to take him out of here tonight. I want to get him across the lake and into my car, which is

on the other side. If you two will help me get him out of here I don't care if you cut up every picture in the school! What do you say?"

Morro glanced at his companion, who shrugged his shoulders. Morro then turned back to the man who was facing them.

"We will help you," he promised.

Dennings thrust the revolver into a back pocket. "All right, come along. Bring your coats and the candle with you."

Morro and his companion put on their coats, and Morro picked up the candle. Dennings took it from him and walked to the stairs, the men following. They trampled heavily up to the second floor, and the faint beam of the flickering candle disappeared from sight.

"Now we can go," whispered Rhodes, when the sound of their footsteps died out. "But be careful and remember that Dennings has a gun. Wonder where that old man is?"

With Vench in the lead the four cadets climbed the stairs and found themselves in the hallway of the second floor. They had no difficulty in finding the stairs to the third floor, as Dennings had left the door open. It was with painful care that they as-

cended and stopped just outside the room into which Dennings had gone.

A single lamp burned in this room and they could see Don standing beside the table, facing Dennings. Back of the man stood the two Frenchmen, obviously ill at ease. Dennings, firmly believing that he was safe, was speaking to Don.

"Get your coat and hat on, Mercer," he was saying. "We're going to take you away from here. It's getting a bit too hot for comfort."

"Where am I going?" asked Don, without moving.

"Never mind that," snapped Dennings. "We took your friend the colonel for a long ride and we are going to take you on one. Don't waste time; hurry up."

Rhodes gripped the arms of the cadets in quick succession. "Let's go!" he hissed, and darted into the room.

At the sound of his footsteps Dennings swung around, his hand sliding toward his rear pocket. But Rhodes was upon him before he could reach it, and Terry was with him. Each of them grasped the arms of the man and Jim threw one arm around his throat. Don uttered a cry at seeing them and rushed to their aid.

Vench had paused to speak to the astonished Frenchmen. His eyes glittering, he thrust his determined chin close to Morro's face.

"Beat it, Paul," he warned. "You and your friend get out of here, and don't come near this school again! I know enough about you now to put you in prison for a long time, so get a move on and get out. And keep your mouth closed!"

Morro looked just once to where Rhodes was taking the revolver from the man they had overpowered and then moved. He seized the arm of his companion and pulled him after him. They found the stairs and ran down them, seeking safety in flight, bewildered and confused. As they passed from the room the other man muttered something in French about the crazy soldier boys.

Vench turned his attention to Dennings, but that was not necessary. The man had been overpowered and his revolver taken away from him. He had offered a brief and savage struggle, but the suddenness of the attack had proved his undoing, and he was powerless. Glaring and cursing he lay on his back, looking with blazing eyes at his young captors.

"Well, Mr. Dennings," said Don. "I guess that after all I am not going for a trip. I'm pretty much of the opinion that you will take the only trip."

"I'll fix you kids for this!" roared Dennings.

"What shall we do now?" asked Jim, disregarding Dennings.

"You fellows tie him up and bring him over to the school," suggested Rhodes. "I'll go back, find out where the major is, and call up the colonel and tell him to get up here, that we have them both."

"Oh, have you got the colonel?" cried Don. Dennings' eyes bulged in astonishment.

"Yes," said Vench, as Rhodes took up the candle and went out. "We rescued him and he is now down in the hotel. Well, let's get busy on this fellow. If we can't find any rope we'll use our belts and take him over to the school. I guess this will break up their precious ring."

While the boys were strapping Dennings' hands back of him with their belts Rhodes was hurrying across the campus in the direction of Locke Hall. The cadets were still skating on the lake and the whole school had the look of regularity about it. No one was near Clanhammer Hall and he reached Locke in safety.

Rhodes hurried to the office, keeping a sharp lookout for the major. He was not in the office, but Captain Chalmers was there. Rhodes considered, and then determined to enlist the aid of the teacher

in capturing the major. But first he asked a question.

"Where is Major Tireson, sir?"

Chalmers answered without hesitation. "He just left for the station," he said. "He said that he had to go away on business for a short time, and he left here in civilian clothes, to be gone for a week. I am in charge now. Is there anything I can do for you, Captain Rhodes?"

"Yes, sir!" exploded Rhodes. "How long ago did he leave?"

"About ten minutes ago. Is there anything wrong? Can——"

Without a word Rhodes scooped up the telephone and pressed the receiver to his ear, leaving the instructor lost in astonishment. It seemed an age before an answer came, but finally the night operator broke in.

"I want the Portville Hotel, operator," called Rhodes. "This is an emergency call, so please rush it."

Captain Chalmers refrained from annoying while Rhodes waited, and soon the hotel answered. Rhodes gave the number of the colonel's room and a moment later the headmaster answered.

"Hello, Colonel Morrell?" called Rhodes. Chal-

mers jumped to his feet with a sharp exclamation, but Rhodes went on: "This is Rhodes, colonel. Major Tireson left the school a few minutes ago to go to the station. I think he is running away. We have just captured Dennings and released Don. See if you can capture him, colonel."

The colonel hung up with a sharp click and Rhodes turned to Chalmers. "I know you are astonished, Captain Chalmers, but we have found the colonel. I'll tell you all about it later. Here is a more pressing matter."

The other boys had entered with the prisoner and they brought him to the office. In a few words matters were explained to Chalmers, and the man was securely locked in a strong room from which there was no escape. Then they waited for the colonel, sitting in the office and talking things over with the man who was destined to succeed Major Tireson as assistant headmaster.

To the astonishment of the cadet body there was no call of taps that night. They returned from skating and to study, but the lights did not go out. No Officer of the Day patrolled the halls, and finally sheer curiosity drove them from their rooms to see what the trouble was. It was then that word spread like wildfire that the colonel had returned.

It was some hours after the telephone call that Colonel Morrell, with springy step and wide smile, burst into the office and shook hands all around. To their anxious questions he replied that Major Tireson had been arrested with the old man of Clanhammer Hall just as he was about to step on a train for New York City. The major had decided that the game was getting much too warm, and he planned to go to Spotville Point, see to it that the colonel was carried off on a long sea voyage, and then disappear. Somehow or other a sense of uneasiness had come over him, and he had decided to clear out, to communicate with Dennings later and decide on the fate of Don. But events had conspired to spoil all of his cherished plans, and he and his companions soon awaited their fate in the local jail.

When the cadets learned that their beloved colonel had returned there was an end, for that night at least, of discipline. The older cadets who knew him well thronged around him, shaking hands and greeting him, and the colonel fairly beamed his pleasure. The story was soon out, and the cadet body heaped warm praise on the boys who had solved the mystery of Clanhammer Hall.

Very much later the bugler made a poor attempt to sound taps, and the cadets went to bed, to lay

awake for the most part and talk across beds of the unexpected developments in their school life. There was a general feeling that not much work would be done on the following day, and in this they were not mistaken. The colonel granted them a full holiday, which they spent on the lake, enjoying the splendid ice and healthy weather. To the colonel it was an enjoyable holiday also, and he appeared on the ice to skate for a brief time with his boys. The fourth class men, just making the acquaintance of their real headmaster, were more than pleased with him.

Captain Chalmers was made assistant headmaster in Tireson's place. In due time the major and Dennings, with three hangers-on, were all given prison terms on various charges. School life settled down to a regular run of routine that was now thoroughly enjoyable, and the boys began to find the days slipping by rapidly and pleasurably.

Clanhammer Hall was in time turned into an alumni hall, and the former graduates of Woodcrest held many a stirring rally within its walls. There was no longer any mystery about the old hall, and clean windows and walls gave a new appearance to the original institution. The dead shrubbery was cut away and the old building once more resumed something of the vigor of its youth.

On one evening just before Christmas the five boys, Vench, Rhodes, Terry, Jim and Don gathered in the Mercer boys' room to discuss things in regard to the reward. There had been offered the sum of five hundred dollars to the one or ones who should discover information leading to the discovery of the whereabouts of the colonel. This reward had been turned over to them that morning, and they sat around the dormitory to discuss it.

Don told them of the card and the old station master. "This is the way I look at it, fellows," he said, earnestly. "Each of us would get a hundred dollars out of it by splitting, and no doubt a hundred dollars would come in handy in one way or another. But Jim and I don't actually need ours. Perhaps some of the rest of you do. That old station agent is pretty well along in life, and some of that money would make the rest of his days a whole lot easier for him. If he hadn't furnished us with the card we would have been in the dark on several points. Jim and I have agreed to turn over our money to him."

"You may turn mine over, too," said Vench. "I have all the money I need, and I'd gladly see him get it."

"That goes for me, too," nodded Captain Rhodes.

"I am not rolling in wealth, but my father takes excellent care of me. The old fellow is welcome to my share."

"Look here," said Terry. "I'm perhaps the least well-to-do of all, but I'm not going to touch my share of it, either. The reward was for information leading to the discovery of clues that would be helpful, and the agent certainly deserves it under those circumstances. Give him the whole thing and make his Christmas a happy one."

This was done. Just before Christmas the boys went home, and Don, Jim and Terry got off the train at Spotville Point, where, Don learned, the train would stop for ten minutes. They approached the ticket window and found the old agent seated before his desk.

"How do you do," greeted Don. "How are you today?"

"Oh, so-so," returned the agent, staring at them without recognition. "Got a bad spell of pain in my back and I ain't just in position to call in a doctor. But no use kickin', I suppose."

"Do you remember us?" inquired Don.

The agent looked closely, and then shook his head.

"No, I don't think— You ain't them soldier boys, are you?"

"Yes, we are the two who came here to ask you about an old gentleman who got off here in October. This is my brother and this is a friend. We are on our way home and just got off the train."

"Hum, I suppose nothin' come out of that post card, did it? I know it wouldn't, told my wife so. I sez 'Catch us ever havin' good luck,' I sez. What's that?"

Don thrust a long envelope under the small opening. "That is something to convince you that for once you guessed wrong," he smiled. "Something did come of that post card, and here is your reward. We all wish you a very Merry Christmas."

The three boys went away, leaving the agent gasping for breath and staring at the envelope in his hand. Finally he opened it and found the check. He shook like a leaf.

"Oh, my good golly!" he said over and over again.

The boys once more seated themselves on the train and soon left Spotville Point far behind them. Terry laughed as he thought of the agent.

"This Christmas will be quite a shock to him," he said.

"I'm glad of it," replied Jim. "Well, I wonder what is in store for us in the future?"

"Oh, nothing much, I guess," laughed Don. "I guess we'll study through the spring, play a little baseball, and then go home for a summer vacation. You know, we have a plain vacation, while the first and second class go to camp."

"Just the same," maintained Jim, stoutly. "I'll bet we'll have some more adventures. We just can't seem to keep out of things."

"Perhaps you'll go sailing again," suggested Terry.

"Maybe," said Don. "I don't really know. But I guess nothing exciting will happen to us."

But Don was wrong. During the summer vacation a great many perils and adventures fell to the lot of the three boys. Their wanderings carried them far afield and they found even more stirring adventures than they had yet encountered. What happened to them then will be related in the third volume of the Mercer Boys Series entitled: "The Mercer Boys on a Treasure Hunt, or the Search for the Phantom Galleon."

THE END